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M I D W I N T E R

CERTAIN TRAVELLERS IN
OLD ENGLAND

BY
JOHN BUCHAN

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TO
VERNON WATNEY

*We two confess twin loyalties—
Wychwood beneath the April skies
Is yours, and many a scented road
That winds in June by Evenlode.
Not less when autumn fires the brake,
Yours the deep heath by Fannich's lake,
The corries where the dun deer roar
And eagles wheel above Sgurr Mòr.
So I, who love with equal mind
The southern sun, the northern wind,
The lilyed lowland water-mead
And the grey hills that cradle Tweed,
Bring you this tale which haply tries
To intertwine our loyalties.*

PREFACE

BY THE EDITOR

LAST year my friend, Mr. Sebastian Derwent, on becoming senior partner of the reputable firm of solicitors which bears his name, instituted a very drastic clearing out of cupboards and shelves in the old house in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Among a mass of derelict papers—cancelled deeds, mouldy files of correspondence, copies of pleadings in cases long ago forgotten—there was one little bundle which mystified him, since it had no apparent relation to the practice of the law. He summoned me to dinner, and, with our chairs drawn up to a bright fire and a decanter of his famous brown sherry between us, we discussed its antecedents.

First there was a document of three quarto pages, which appeared to be a fair copy in a scrivener's hand. It started and finished abruptly, so we judged it to be a portion of a larger work. Then came a long ill-written manuscript, partly in a little volume of which the clasp and lock had been broken, and partly on loose paper which

seemed to have been torn from the beginnings and ends of printed books. The paper had no watermark that we could discover, but its quality suggested the eighteenth century. Last there was a bundle of letters in various hands, all neatly docketed and dated. Mr. Derwent entrusted me with the papers, for certain words and phrases in the quarto sheets had stirred my interest. After considerable study I discovered that the packet contained a story, obscure in parts, but capable of being told with some pretence of continuity.

First for the matter copied by the amanuensis. It was clearly a fragment, intended by the compiler to form part of an introduction to the work. On first reading it I rubbed my eyes and tasted the joy of the discoverer, for I believed that I had stumbled upon an unknown manuscript of Mr. James Boswell, written apparently after the publication of his *Life of Johnson*, and designed for a supplementary volume, which, Dr. Johnson being dead, he felt at liberty to compile. On reflection I grew less certain. The thing was undoubtedly the work of an intimate friend of the Great Lexicographer, but, though there were mannerisms of style and thought which suggested Mr. Boswell, I did not feel able to claim his authorship with any confidence. It might be the production of one or other of the Wartons, or of Sir Robert Chambers, or of some Oxford friend of Johnson whose name has not come down to us. Mr. Derwent at my request explored the records of his firm, which extended back for the better part of

a century, but could find no evidence that it had ever done business for any member of the family of Auchinleck. Nevertheless I incline to attribute the thing to Mr. Boswell, for he alone of Johnson's circle was likely to have the eager interest in Scotland which the manuscript reveals, and the dates do not conflict with what we know of his movements.

Here, at all events, is the text of it :

In the last week of June in the year 1763 Johnson was in Oxford, and I had the honour to accompany him one afternoon to the village of Elsfeld, some four miles from the city, on a visit to Mr. Francis Wise, one of the fellows of Trinity College and Radcliffe's librarian. As I have already mentioned, there were certain episodes in the past life of my illustrious friend as to which I knew nothing, and certain views, nay, I venture to say prejudices, in his mind, for the origin of which I was at a loss to account. In particular I could never receive from him any narrative of his life during the years 1745 and 1746, the years of our last civil war, during which his literary career seems to have been almost totally suspended. When I endeavoured to probe the matter, he answered me with some asperity, so that I feared to embarrass him with further questions. "Sir, I was very poor," he once said, "and misery has no chronicles." His reticence on the point was the more vexatious to me, since, though a loyal supporter of the present Monarchy and Constitution, he always revealed a peculiar tenderness towards the unfortunate House of Stuart, and I could not but think that in some episode in his past lay the key to a sentiment which was at variance with his philosophy of government. I was also puzzled to explain to my own mind the reason for his attitude towards Scotland and the Scotch nation, which afforded him matter for constant sarcasms and frequent explosions of wrath. As the world knows, he

had a lively interest in the primitive life of the Highlands, and an apparent affection for those parts, but towards the rest of Scotland he maintained a demeanour so critical as to be liable to the reproach of harshness. These prejudices, cherished so habitually that they could not be attributed to mere fits of spleen, surprised me in a man of such pre-eminent justice and wisdom, and I was driven to think that some early incident in his career must have given them birth ; but my curiosity remained unsatisfied, for when I interrogated him, I was met with a sullen silence, if we were alone, and, if company were present, a tempestuous ridicule which covered me with blushes.

On this occasion at Elsfield that happened which whetted my curiosity, but the riddle remained unread till at this late stage of my life, when my revered Master has long been dead, fortune has given the key into my hand. Mr. Francis Wise dwelt in a small ancient manor of Lord North's, situated on the summit of a hill with a great prospect over the Cherwell valley and beyond it to the Cotswold uplands. We walked thither, and spent the hour before dinner very pleasantly in a fine library, admiring our host's collection of antiquities and turning the pages of a noble folio wherein he had catalogued the coins in the Bodleian collection. Johnson was in a cheerful humour, the exercise of walking had purified his blood, and at dinner he ate heartily of veal sweetbreads, and drank three or four glasses of Madeira wine. I remember that he commended especially a great ham. "Sir," he said, "the flesh of the pig is most suitable for Englishmen and Christians. Foreigners love it little, Jews and infidels abhor it."

When the meal was over we walked in the garden, which was curiously beautified with flowering bushes and lawns adorned with statues and fountains. We assembled for tea in an arbour, constructed after the fashion of a Roman temple, on the edge of a clear pool. Beyond the water there was a sharp declivity, which had been utilised to make a cascade from the pool's overflow. This descended to a stone tank like an ancient bath, and on each

side of the small ravine lines of beeches had been planted. Through the avenue of the trees there was a long vista of meadows in the valley below, extending to the wooded eminence of the Duke of Marlborough's palace of Blenheim, and beyond to the Cotswold hills. The sun was declining over these hills, and, since the harbour looked to the west, the pool and the cascade were dappled with gold, and pleasant beams escaped through the shade to our refuge.

Johnson was regaled with tea, while Mr. Wise and I discussed a fresh bottle of wine. It was now that my eminent friend's demeanour, which had been most genial during dinner, suffered a sudden change. The servant who waited upon us was an honest Oxfordshire rustic with an open countenance and a merry eye. To my surprise I observed Johnson regarding him with extreme disfavour. "Who is that fellow?" he asked when the man had left us. Mr. Wise mentioned his name, and that he was of a family in the village. "His face reminds me of a very evil scoundrel," was the reply. "A Scotchman," he added. "But no nation has the monopoly of rogues."

After that my friend's brow remained cloudy, and he stirred restlessly in his chair, as if eager to be gone. Our host talked of the antiquities in the neighbourhood, notably of the White Horse in Berkshire and of a similar primitive relic in Buckinghamshire, but he could elicit no response, though the subject was one to which I knew Johnson's interest to be deeply pledged. He remained with his chin sunk on his breast, and his eyes moody as if occupied with painful memories. I made anxious inquiries as to his health, but he waved me aside. Once he raised his head, and remained for some time staring across the valley at the declining sun.

"What are these hills?" he asked.

Mr. Wise repeated names—Woodstock, Ditchley, Enstone. "The trees on the extreme horizon," he said, "belong to Wychwood Forest."

The words seemed to add to Johnson's depression. "Is it so?" he murmured. "Verily a strange coin-

cidence. Sir, among these hills, which I now regard, were spent some of the bitterest moments of my life."

He said no more, and I durst not question him, nor did I ever succeed at any later date in drawing him back to the subject. I have a strong recollection of the discomfort of that occasion, for Johnson relapsed into glumness and presently we rose to leave. Mr. Wise, who loved talking and displayed his treasures with the zest of the owner of a raree-show, would have us visit, before going, a Roman altar which, he said, had lately been unearthed on his estate. Johnson viewed it peevishly, and pointed out certain letters in the inscription which seemed fresher than the rest. Mr. Wise confessed that he had himself re-cut these letters, in conformity, as he believed, with the purpose of the original. This threw Johnson into a transport of wrath. "Sir," he said, "the man who would tamper with an ancient monument, with whatever intentions, is capable of defiling his father's tomb." There was no word uttered between us on the walk back to Oxford. Johnson strode at such a pace that I could scarcely keep abreast of him, and I would fain have done as he did on an earlier occasion, and cried *Sufflamina*.*

The incident which I have recorded has always remained vivid in my memory, but I despaired of unravelling the puzzle, and believed that the clue was buried for ever in the grave of the illustrious dead. But, by what I prefer to call Providence rather than Chance, certain papers have lately come into my possession, which enable me to clear up the mystery of that summer evening, to add a new chapter to the life of one of the greatest of mankind, and to portray my dear and revered friend in a part which cannot fail to heighten our conception of the sterling worth of his character.

Thus far the quarto pages. Their author—Mr. Boswell or some other—no doubt intended to explain how he received the further papers, and

* See Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, anno 1754.

to cast them into some publishable form. Neither task was performed. The rest of the manuscript, as I have said, was orderly enough, but no editorial care had been given it. I have discovered nothing further about Alastair Maclean save what the narrative records, and my research among the archives of Oxfordshire families has not enabled me to add much to the history of the other figures. But I have put such materials as I had into the form of a tale, which seems of sufficient interest to present to the world. I could wish that Mr. Boswell had lived to perform the task, for I am confident that he would have made a better job of it.

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MIDWINTER

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A HIGHLAND GENTLEMAN MISSES HIS WAY

THE road which had begun as a rutted cart-track sank presently to a grassy footpath among scrub oaks, and as the boughs whipped his face the young man cried out impatiently and pulled up his horse to consider. He was on a journey where secrecy was not less vital than speed, and he was finding the two incompatible. That morning he had avoided Banbury and the high road which followed the crown of Cotswold to the young streams of Thames, for that way lay Beaufort's country, and at such a time there would be jealous tongues to question passengers. For the same reason he had left the main Oxford road on his right, since the channel between Oxford and the North might well be troublesome, even for a respectable traveller who called himself Mr. Andrew Watson, and was ready with a legend of a sea-coal business in Newcastle. But his circumspection seemed to have taken him too far on an easterly course into a land of tangled forests. He pulled

out his chart of the journey and studied it with puzzled eyes. My Lord Cornbury's house could not be twenty miles distant, but what if the twenty miles were pathless? An October gale was tossing the boughs and whirling the dead bracken, and a cold rain was beginning. Ill weather was nothing to one nourished among Hebridean north-westerns, but he cursed a land in which there were no landmarks. A hill-top, a glimpse of sea or loch, even a stone on a ridge, were things a man could steer by, but what was he to do in this unfeatured woodland? These soft south-country folk stuck to their roads, and the roads were forbidden him.

A little farther and the track died away in a thicket of hazels. He drove his horse through the scrub and came out on a glade, where the ground sloped steeply to a jungle of willows, beyond which he had a glimpse through the drizzle of a grey-green fen. Clearly that was not his direction, and he turned sharply to the right along the edge of the declivity. Once more he was in the covert, and his ill-temper grew with every briar that whipped his face. Suddenly he halted, for he heard the sound of speech.

It came from just in front of him—a voice speaking loud and angry, and now and then a squeal like a scared animal's. An affair between some forester and a poaching hind, he concluded, and would fain have turned aside. But the thicket on each hand was impenetrable, and, moreover, he earnestly desired advice about the road. He

was hesitating in his mind, when the cries broke out again, so sharp with pain that instinctively he pushed forward. The undergrowth blocked his horse, so he dismounted and, with a hand fending his eyes, made a halter of the bridle and dragged the animal after him. He came out into a little dell down which a path ran, and confronted two human beings.

They did not see him, being intent on their own business. One was a burly fellow in a bottle-green coat, a red waistcoat, and corduroy small clothes, from whose gap-toothed mouth issued volleys of abuse. In his clutches was a slim boy in his early teens, a dark sallow slip of a lad, clad in nothing but a shirt and short leather breeches. The man had laid his gun on the ground, and had his knee in the small of the child's back, while he was viciously twisting one arm so that his victim cried like a rabbit in the grip of a weasel. The barbarity of it undid the traveller's discretion.

"Hold there," he cried, and took a pace forward.

The man turned his face, saw a figure which he recognized as a gentleman, and took his knee from the boy's back, though he still kept a clutch on his arm.

"Sarvant, sir," he said, touching his hat with his free hand. "What might 'ee be wanting o' Tom Heather?" His voice was civil, but his face was ugly.

"Let the lad go."

"Sir Edward's orders, sir—that's Sir Edward

Turner, Baronet, of Ambrosden House in this 'ere shire, 'im I 'as the honour to serve. Sir Edward 'e says, 'Tom,' 'e says, 'if 'ee finds a poacher in the New Woods 'ee knows what to do with 'im without troubling me'; and I reckon I does know. Them moor-men is the worst varmint in the country, and the youngest is the black-heartedest, like foxes."

The grip had relaxed and the boy gave a twist which freed him. Instantly he dived into the scrub. The keeper made a bound after him, thought better of it and stood sullenly regarding the traveller.

"I've been a-laying for the misbegotten slip them five weeks, and now I loses him, and all along of 'ee, sir." His tones suggested that silver might be a reasonable compensation.

But the young man, disliking his looks, was in no mood for almsgiving, and forgot the need of discretion. Also he came from a land where coin of the realm was scarce.

"If it's your master's orders to torture babes, then you and he can go to the devil. But show me the way out of this infernal wood and you shall have a shilling for your pains."

At first the keeper seemed disposed to obey, for he turned and made a sign for the traveller to follow. But he swung round again, and, resting the gun which he had picked up in the crook of his arm, he looked the young man over with a dawning insolence in his eyes. He was beginning to see a more profitable turn in the business. The

horseman was soberly but reputably dressed, and his beast was good, but what did he in this outlandish place ?

“ Making so bold,” said the keeper, “ how come ’ee a-wandering ’ere, sir ? Where might ’ee be a-making for ? ”

“ Charlbury,” was the answer.

The man whistled. “ Charlbury,” he repeated. “ Again begging pardon, sir, it’s a place known for a nest of Papishes. I’d rather ha’ heerd ’ee was going to Hell. And where might ’ee come from last, sir ? ”

The traveller checked his rising temper. “ Banbury,” he said shortly.

The keeper whistled again. “ ’Ee’ve fetched a mighty roundabout way, sir, and the good turnpike running straight for any Christian to see. But I’ve heard tell of folks that fought shy of turnpikes.”

“ Confound you, man,” the traveller cried ; “ show me the road or I will find it myself and you’ll forfeit your shilling.”

The keeper did not move. “ A shilling’s no price for a man’s honesty. I reckon ’ee mun come up with me to Sir Edward, sir. He says to me only this morning—‘ Ee watch the Forest, Tom, and if ’ee finds any that can’t give good account of themselves, ’ee fetch them up to me, and it’ll maybe mean a golden guinea in your pocket.’ Sir Edward ’e’s a Parliament man, and a Justice, and ’e’s hot for King and country. There’s soldiers at Islip bridge-end asking questions of all as is journeying west, and there’s questions

Sir Edward is going to ask of a gentleman as travels from Banbury to Charlbury by the edges of Otmoor."

The servility had gone from the man's voice, and in its place were insolence and greed. A guinea might have placated him, but the traveller was not accustomed to bribe. A hot flush had darkened his face, and his eyes were bright.

"Get out of my way, you rogue," he cried.

The keeper stood his ground. "'Ee will come to Sir Edward with me if 'ee be an honest man."

"And if not?"

"It's my duty to constrain 'ee in the name of our Lord the King."

The man had raised his gun, but before he could bring the barrel forward he was looking at a pistol held in a very steady hand. He was no coward, but he had little love for needless risks, when he could find a better way. He turned and ran up the steep path at a surprising pace for one of his build, and as he ran he blew shrilly on a whistle.

The traveller left alone in the dell bit his lips with vexation. He had made a pretty mess of a journey which above all things should have been inconspicuous, and had raised a hue and cry after him on the domain of some arrogant Whig. He heard the keeper's steps and the note of his whistle grow fainter; he seemed to be crying to others and answers came back faintly. In a few minutes he would be in a brawl with lackeys. . . . In that jungle there was no way of escape for a mounted man, so he must needs stand and fight.

And then suddenly he was aware of a face in the hazels.

It was the slim boy whom his intervention had saved from a beating. The lad darted from his cover and seized the horse's bridle. Speaking no word, he made signs to the other to follow, and the traveller, glad of any port in a storm, complied. They slithered at a great pace down the steep bank to the thicket of willows, which proved to be the brink of a deep ditch. A little way along it they crossed by a ford of hurdles, where the water was not over a man's riding boots. They were now in a morass, which they threaded by a track which showed dimly among the reeds, and, as the whistling and cries were still audible behind them, they did not relax their pace. But after two more deep runnels had been passed, and a mere thick with water-lilies crossed by a chain of hard tussocks like stepping-stones, the guide seemed to consider the danger gone. He slowed down, laughing, and cocked snooks in the direction of the pursuit. Then he signed to the traveller to remount his horse, but when the latter would have questioned him, he shook his head and put a finger on his lips. He was either dumb, or a miracle of prudence.

The young man found himself in a great green fenland, but the falling night and the rain limited his view to a narrow circle. There was a constant crying of snipe and plover around him, and the noise of wild fowl rose like the croaking of frogs in the Campagna. Acres of rank pasture were

threaded with lagoons where the brown water winked and bubbled above fathomless mud. The traveller sniffed the air with a sense of something foreign and menacing. The honest bitter smell of peat-bogs he loved, but the odour of this marsh was heavy and sweet and rotten. As his horse's hooves squelched in the sodden herbage he shivered a little and glanced suspiciously at his guide. Where was this gypsy halfling leading him? It looked as if he had found an ill-boding sanctuary.

With every yard that he advanced into the dank green wilderness his oppression increased. The laden air, the mist, the clamour of wild birds, the knowledge that his horse was no advantage since a step aside would set it wallowing to the girths, all combined to make the place a prison-house, hateful to one on an urgent mission. . . . Suddenly he was above the fen on a hard causeway, where hooves made a solid echo. His spirits recovered, for he recognized Roman work, and a Roman road did not end in sloughs. On one side, below the level of the causeway, was a jungle of blackthorn and elder, and a whiff of wood-smoke reached his nostrils. The guide halted and three times gave a call like that of a nesting redshank. It was answered, and from an alley in the scrub a man appeared.

He was a roughly dressed countryman, wearing huge leathern boots muddied to the knee. Apparently the guide was not wholly dumb, for he spoke to him in an odd voice that croaked from the back of his throat, and the man nodded and bent his

brows. Then he lifted his eyes and solemnly regarded the horseman for the space of some seconds.

"You be welcome, sir," he said. "If you can make shift with poor fare there be supper and lodging waiting for you."

The boy made signs for him to dismount, and led off the horse, while the man beckoned him to follow into the tunnel in the scrub. In less than fifty yards he found himself in a clearing where a knuckle of gravel made a patch of hard ground. In the centre stood a small ancient obelisk, like an overgrown milestone. A big fire of logs and brushwood was burning, and round it sat half a dozen men, engaged in cooking. They turned slow eyes on the new-comer, and made room for him in their circle.

"Tom Heather's been giving trouble. He cotched Zerry and was a-basting him when this gentleman rides up. Then he turns on the gentleman, and, being feared o' him as man to man, goes whistling for Red Tossplot and Brother Mark. So Zerry brings the gentleman into the Moor, and here he be. I tell him he's kindly welcome, and snug enough with us moor-men, though the King's soldiers was sitting in all the Seven Towns."

"He'd be safe," said one, "though Lord Abingdon and his moor-drivers was prancing up at Beckley."

There was a laugh at this, and the new-comer, cheered by the blaze and the smell of food, made suitable reply. He had not quite understood their slow burring speech, nor did they altogether follow his words, for he spoke English in the formal

clipped fashion of one to whom it was an acquired tongue. But the goodwill on both sides was manifest, and food was pressed on him—wild duck roasted on stakes, hunks of brown bread, and beer out of leather jacks. The men had been fowling, for great heaps of mallard and teal and widgeon were piled beyond the fire.

The traveller ate heartily, for he had had no meal since breakfast, and as he ate, he studied his companions in the firelight. They were rough-looking fellows, dressed pretty much alike in frieze and leather, and they had the sallowish skin and yellow-tinged eyes which he remembered to have seen among dwellers in the Ravenna marshes. But they were no gypsies or outlaws, but had the assured and forthright air of men with some stake in the land. Excellent were their manners, for the presence of a stranger in no way incommoded them; they attended to his wants, and with easy good-breeding talked their own talk. Understanding little of that talk, he occupied himself in observing their faces and gestures with the interest of a traveller in a new country. These folk were at once slower and speedier than his own kind—more deliberate in speech and movement, but quicker to show emotion in their open countenances. He speculated on their merits as soldiers, for against such as these he and his friends must presently fight.

“’Morrow we’d best take Mercot Fleet,” said one. “Mas’r Midwinter reckons as the floods will be down come Sunday.”

“Right, neighbour Basson,” said another. “He knows times and seasons better’n Parson and near as well as Almighty God.”

“What be this tale of bloody wars?” asked a third. “The Spoonbills be out, and that means that the land is troubled. They was saying down at Noke that Long Giles was seen last week at Banbury fair and the Spayniard was travelling the Lunnon road. All dressed up he were like a fine gentleman, and at Wheatley Green Man he was snuffing out o’ Squire Norreys’ box.”

“Who speaks of the Spoonbills?” said the man who had first welcomed the traveller. “We bain’t no ale-house prattlers. What Mas’r Midwinter wants us to know I reckon he’ll tell us open and neighbourly. Think you he’ll make music this night?”

“He’s had his supper the best part of an hour, and then he’ll take tobacco. After that happen he’ll gie us a tune.”

The speaker had looked over his shoulder, and the traveller, following his glance, became aware that close on the edge of the thicket a small tent was pitched. The night had fallen thick and moonless, but the firelight, wavering in the wind, showed it as a grey patch against the gloom of the covert. As the conversation droned on, that patch held his eyes like a magnet. There was a man there, some one with the strange name of Midwinter, some one whom these moor-men held in reverence. The young man had the appetite of his race for mysteries, and his errand had keyed

him to a mood of eager inquiry. He looked at the blur which was the tent as a terrier watches a badger's earth.

The talk round the fire had grown boisterous, for some one had told a tale which woke deep rumbling laughter. Suddenly it was hushed, for the thin high note of a violin cleft the air.

The sound was muffled by the tent-cloth, but none the less it dominated and filled that lonely place. The traveller had a receptive ear for music and had heard many varieties in his recent wanderings, from the operas of Rome and Paris to gypsy dances in wild glens of Apennine and Pyrenees. But this fiddling was a new experience, for it obeyed no law, but jigged and wailed and chuckled like a gale in an old house. It seemed to be a symphony of the noises of the moor, where unearthly birds sang duets with winds from the back of beyond. It stirred him strangely. His own bagpipes could bring tears to his eyes with memory of things dear and familiar; but this quickened his blood, like a voice from a far world.

The group by the fire listened stolidly with their heads sunk, but the young man kept his eyes on the tent. Presently the music ceased, and from the flap a figure emerged with the fiddle in its hand. The others rose to their feet, and remained standing till the musician had taken a seat at the other side of the fire from the traveller. "Welcome, Mas'r Midwinter," was the general greeting, and one of them told him the story of Tom Heather and their guest.

The young man by craning his neck could see the new figure clear in the glow of the embers. He made out a short man of an immense breadth of shoulder, whose long arms must have reached well below his knees. He had a large square face, tanned to the colour of bark, and of a most surprising ugliness, for his nose was broken in the middle, and one cheek and the corner of one eye were puckered with an old scar. Chin and lips were shaven, and the wide mouth showed white regular teeth. His garments seemed to be of leather like the others, but he wore a cravat, and his hair, though unpowdered, was neatly tied.

He was looking at the traveller and, catching his eye, he bowed and smiled pleasantly.

“You have found but a rough lodging, Mr. ——” he said, with the lift of interrogation in his voice.

“Andrew Watson they call me. A merchant of Newcastle, sir, journeying Bristol-wards on a matter of business.” The formula, which had sounded well enough hitherto, now seemed inept, and he spoke it with less assurance.

The fiddler laughed. “That is for change-houses. Among friends you will doubtless tell another tale. For how comes a merchant of the North country to be so far from a high road? Shall I read the riddle, sir?”

He took up his violin and played very low and sweetly a Border lilt called “The Waukin’ o’ the Fauld.” The young man listened with interest, but his face did not reveal what the musician sought. The latter tried again, this time the tune

called "Colin's Cattle," which was made by the fairies and was hummed everywhere north of Forth. Bright eyes read the young man's face. "I touch you," the fiddler said, "but not closely."

For a moment he seemed to consider, and then drew from his instrument a slow dirge, with the rain in it and the west wind and the surge of forlorn seas. It was that lament which in all the country from Mull to Moidart is the begetter of long thoughts. He played it like a master, making his fiddle weep and brood and exult in turn, and he ended with a fantastic variation so bitter with pain that the young man, hearing his ancestral melody in this foreign land, cried out in amazement.

The musician lowered his violin, smiling. "This time," he said, "I touch you at the heart. Now I know you. You have nothing to fear among the moor-men of the Seven Towns. Take your ease, Alastair Maclean, among friends."

The traveller, thus unexpectedly unveiled, could find no words for his astonishment.

"Are you of the honest party?" he stammered, more in awe than in anxiety.

"I am of no party. Ask the moor-men if the Spoonbills trouble their heads with Governments?"

The answer from the circle was a laugh.

"Who are you, then, that watches thus the comings and goings of travellers?"

"I am nothing—a will-o'-the-wisp at your service—a clod of vivified dust whom its progenitors christened Amos Midwinter. I have no

possessions but my name, and no calling but that of philosopher. Naked I came from the earth, and naked I will return to it."

He plucked with a finger at the fiddle-strings, and evoked an odd lilt. Then he crooned :

" Three naked men I saw,
One to hang and one to draw,
One to feed the corbie's maw."

The men by the fire shivered, and one spoke. " Let be, Mas'r Midwinter. Them words makes my innards cold."

" I will try others," and he sang :

" Three naked men we be,
Stark aneath the blackthorn tree.
Christ ha' mercy on such as we ! "

The young man found his apprehensions yielding place to a lively curiosity. From this madman, whoever he might be, he ran no risk of betrayal. The thought flashed over his mind that here was one who might further the cause he served.

" I take it you are not alone in your calling ? " he said.

" There are others—few but choice. There are no secrets among us who camp by Jacob's Stone." He pointed to the rude obelisk which was just within the glow of the fire. " Once that was an altar where the Romans sacrificed to fierce gods and pretty goddesses. It is a thousand years and more since it felt their flame, but it has always been

a trysting-place. We Christian men have forsworn Apollo, but maybe he still lingers, and the savour of our little cooking fires may please him. I am one that takes no chances with the old gods. . . . Here there is safety for the honest law-breaker, and confidence for the friend, for we are reverent souls. How does it go?—*Fides et Pax et Honos Pudorque priscus.*”

“Then tell me of your brotherhood?”

The man laughed. “That no man can know unless he be sealed of it. From the Channel to the Tyne they call us the Spoonbills, and on Cumbrian moors they know us as the Bog-blitters. But our titles are as many as the by-names of Jupiter. Up in your country I have heard that men talk of us as the Left-Handed.”

He spoke the last word in Gaelic—*ciotach*—and the young man at the sound of his own tongue almost leapt to his feet.

“Have you the speech?” he cried in the same language.

The man shook his head. “I have nothing. For our true name is that I have sung to you. We are the Naked Men.” And he crooned again the strange catch.

For an instant Alastair felt his soul clouded by an eeriness which his bustling life had not known since as a little boy he had wandered alone into the corries of Sgurr Dubh. The moonless night was black about him, and it had fallen silent except for the sputter of logs. He seemed cut off from all things familiar by infinite miles of midnight,

and in the heart of the darkness was this madman who knew all things and made a mock of knowledge. The situation so far transcended his experience that his orderly world seemed to melt into shadows. The tangible bounds of life dislimned and he looked into outer space. But the fiddler dispelled the atmosphere of awe, for he pulled out a pipe and filled and lit it.

"I can offer you better hospitality, sir, than a bed by the fire. A share of my tent is at your service. These moor-men are hardened to it, but if you press the ground this October night you will most surely get a touch of the moor-evil, and that is ill to cure save by a week's drinking of Oddington Well. So by your grace we will leave our honest friends to their talk of latimer and autumn markets."

Accompanied by deep-voiced "Good-nights" Alastair followed the fiddler to the tent, which proved to be larger and more pretentious than it had appeared from the fire. Midwinter lit a small lamp which he fastened to the pole, and closed the flap. The traveller's mails had been laid on the floor, and two couches had been made up of skins of fox and deer and badger heaped on dry rushes.

"You do not use tobacco?" Midwinter asked. "Then I will administer a cordial against the marsh fever." From a leathern case he took a silver-mounted bottle, and poured a draught into a horn cup. It was a kind of spiced brandy which Alastair had drunk in Southern France, and it ran through his blood like a mild and kindly fire,

driving out the fatigue of the day but disposing to a pleasant drowsiness. He removed his boots and coat and cravat, loosened the points of his breeches, and replaced his wig with a kerchief, and flung himself gratefully on the couch.

Meantime the other had stripped almost to the buff, revealing a mighty chest furred like a pelt. Alastair noted that the underclothes which remained were of silk ; he noticed, too, that the man had long fine hands at the end of his brawny arms, and that his skin, where the weather had not burned it, was as delicately white as a lady's. Midwinter finished his pipe, sitting hunched among the furs, with his eyes fixed steadily on the young man. There was a mesmerism in those eyes which postponed sleep, and drove Alastair to speak. Besides, the lilt sung by the fire still hummed in his ears.

“ Who told you my name ? ” he asked.

“ That were too long a tale. Suffice it to say that I knew of your coming, and that long before Banbury you entered the orbit of my knowledge. Nay, sir, I can tell you also your errand, and I warn you that you will fail. You are about to beat at a barred and bolted door.”

“ I must think you mistaken.”

“ For your youth's sake, I would that I were. Consider, sir. You come from the North to bid a great man risk his all on a wild hazard. What can you, who have all your days been an adventurer, know of the dragging weight of an ordered life and broad lands and a noble house ? The rich

man of old turned away sorrowful from Christ because he had great possessions! Think you that the rich man nowadays will be inclined to follow your boyish piping? "

Alastair, eager to hear more but mindful of caution, finessed.

"I had heard better reports of his Grace of Beaufort," he said.

The brown eyes regarded him quizzically. "I did not speak of the Duke, but of Lord Cornbury."

The young man exclaimed. "But I summon him in the name of loyalty and religion."

"Gallant words. But I would remind you that loyalty and religion have many meanings, and self-interest is a skilled interpreter."

"Our Prince has already done enough to convince even self-interest."

"Not so. You have for a moment conquered Scotland, but you will not hold it, for it is written in nature that Highlands will never for long control Lowlands. England you have not touched and will never move. The great men have too much to lose and the plain folk are careless about the whole quarrel. They know nothing of your young Prince except that he is half foreigner and whole Papist, and has for his army a mob of breechless mountainers. You can win only by enlisting Old England, and Old England has forgotten you."

"Let her but remain neutral, and we will beat the Hanoverian's soldiers."

"Maybe. But to clinch victory you must per-

suade the grandees of this realm, and in that I think you will fail. You are Johnnie Armstrong and the King. 'To seek het water beneath cauld ice, surely it is a great follie.' And, like Johnnie, the time will come for you to say good-night."

"What manner of man are you, who speak like an oracle? You are gentle born?"

"I am gentle born, but I have long since forfeited my heritage. Call me Ulysses, who has seen all the world's cities and men, and has at length returned to Ithaca. I am a dweller in Old England."

"That explains little."

"Nay, it explains all. There is an Old England which has outlived Roman and Saxon and Dane and Norman and will outlast the Hanoverian. It has seen priest turn to presbyter and presbyter to parson and has only smiled. It is the land of the edge of moorlands and the rims of forests and the twilight before dawn, and strange knowledge still dwells in it. Lords and Parliament-men bustle about, but the dust of their coaches stops at the roadside hedges, and they do not see the quiet eyes watching them at the fords. Those eyes are their masters, young sir. I am gentle born, as you guess, and have been in my day scholar and soldier, but now my companions are the moor-men and the purley-men and the hill-shepherds and the raggle-taggle gypsies. And I am wholly content, for my calling is philosophy. I stand aside in life, and strike no blows and make no bargain, but I learn that which is hid from others."

Alastair stirred impatiently.

"You are not above forty," he said. "You have health and wits and spirit. Great God, man, have you no cause or leader to fight for? Have you no honest ambition to fulfil before you vanish into the dark?"

"None. You and I are at opposite poles of mind. You are drunken with youth and ardent to strike a blow for a dozen loves. You value life, but you will surrender it joyfully for a whimsey of honour. You travel with a huge baggage of ambitions and loyalties. For me, I make it my business to travel light, caring nothing for King or party or church. As I told you, I and my like are the Naked Men."

Alastair's eyes were drooping.

"Have you no loyalties?" he asked sleepily.

The answer wove itself into his first dream. "I have the loyalties of Old England."

When Alastair awoke he found his boots cleaned from the mud of yesterday, and his coat well brushed and folded. The moor-men had gone off to their fowling, and the two were alone in the clearing, on which had closed down a dense October fog. They breakfasted off a flagon of beer and a broiled wild-duck, which Midwinter cooked on a little fire. He had resumed his coarse leather garments, and looked like some giant gnome as he squatted at his task. But daytime had taken from him the odd glamour of the past night. He now seemed only a thick-set countryman—a horse doctor or a small yeoman.

The boy Zerry appeared with the horse, which had been skilfully groomed, and Midwinter led the young man to the Roman causeway.

"It is a clear road to Oddington," he told him, "where you can cross the river by the hurdle bridge. Keep the bells of Woodeaton that we call the Flageolets on your left hand—they will be ringing for St. Luke's morn. Presently you will come to the Stratford road, which will bring you to Enstone and the fringe of Wychwood forest. You will be at Cornbury long before the dinner-hour."

When Alastair was in the saddle, the other held out his hand.

"I have a liking for you, and would fain serve you. You will not be advised by me but will go your own proud road. God prosper you, young sir. But if it so be that you should lose your fine baggage and need a helper, then I have this word for you. Find an ale-house which, whatever its sign, has an open eye painted beneath it, or a cross-roads with a tuft of broom tied to the sign-post. Whistle there the catch I taught you last night, and maybe the Naked Men will come to your aid."

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH A NOBLEMAN IS PERPLEXED

BY midday Alastair, riding at leisure, had crossed the first downs of Cotswold and dropped upon the little town of Charlbury, drowsing by Evenlode in a warm October noon. He had left the fog of morning behind in the Cherwell valley, the gale of the previous day had died, and the second summer of St. Luke lay soft on the country-side. In the benign weather the events of the night before seemed a fantastic dream. No mystery could lurk in this land of hedgerows and fat pastures; and the figure of Midwinter grew as absurd in his recollection as the trolls that trouble an indifferent sleeper. But a vague irritation remained. The fellow had preached a cowardly apathy towards all that a gentleman held dear. In the rebound the young man's ardour flamed high; he would carve with his sword and his wits a road to power, and make a surly world acknowledge him. Unselfish aims likewise filled his mind—a throne for his Prince, power for Clan Gillan, pride for his land, and for his friends riches and love.

In Charlbury he selected his inn, the Wheat-

sheaf, had his horse fed and rubbed down, drank a tankard of ale, rid himself of the dust of the roads, and deposited his baggage. A decorous and inconspicuous figure, in his chocolate coat and green velvet waistcoat with a plain dark hat of three cocks, the servants of the inn were at once civil and incurious. He questioned the landlord about the Forest of Wychwood, as if his errand lay with one of the rangers, and was given a medley of information in a speech which had the slurred "s's" and the burred "r's" of Gloucestershire. There was the Honourable Mr. Baptist Leveson-Gower, at the Rangers' Lodge, and Robert Lee at the Burford Lawn Lodge, and Jack Blackstone, him they called Chuffle Jack, at the Thatched Lodge, and likewise the verderers, Peg Lee and Bob Jenkinson. He assumed that his guest's business lay with Mr. Leveson-Gower, and Alastair did not undeceive him, but asked casually where lay Cornbury. The landlord took him by the arm, and pointed beyond the stream to the tree-clad hills. "Over the river, sir, by the road that turns right-handed at the foot of the street. You passes the gate on your way to Rangers' Lodge. His Lordship be in residence, and entertains high quality. His lady sister, the Scotch Duchess, arrived two days back, and there's been post-chaises and coaches going to and fro all week."

Alastair remounted his horse in some disquiet, for a houseful of great folks seemed to make but a poor setting for urgent and secret conclaves. By a stone bridge he crossed the Evenlode which

foamed in spate, the first free-running stream he had seen since he left the North, and passed through massive iron gates between white lodges built in Charles the Second's day. He found himself in an avenue of chestnuts and young limes, flanked by the boles of great beeches, which stretched magnificently up the slopes of a hill. In the centre was a gravelled road for coaches, but on either side lay broad belts of turf strewn with nuts and fallen leaves. . . . His assurance began to fail, for he remembered Midwinter's words on the Moor. The place was a vast embattled fortress of ease, and how would a messenger fare here who brought a summons to hazard all? In his own country a gentleman's house was a bare stone tower, looking out on moor or sea, with a huddle of hovels round the door. To such dwellings men sat loose, as to a tent in a campaign. But the ordered amenities of such a mansion as this—the decent town at the gates richer than a city of Scotland, the acres of policies that warded the house from the vulgar eye, the secular trees, the air of long-descended peace—struck a chill to his hopes. What did a kestrel in the home of peacocks?

At the summit of the hill the road passed beneath an archway into a courtyard; but here masons were at work and Alastair turned to the left, in doubt about the proper entrance. Fifty yards brought him in sight of a corner of the house and into a pleasance bright with late flowers, from which a park fell away into a shallow vale. There

in front of him was a group of people walking on the stone of the terrace.

He was observed, and from the party a gentleman came forward, while the others turned their backs and continued their stroll. The gentleman was in the thirties, a slim figure a little bent in the shoulders, wearing his own hair, which was of a rich brown, and dressed very plainly in a country suit of green. He advanced with friendly peering eyes, and Alastair, who had dismounted, recognized the master of the house from a miniature he had seen in M. de Tremouille's hands.

"Have I the honour to address Lord Cornbury?" he asked.

The other bowed, smiling, and his short-sighted eyes looked past the young man, and appraised his horse.

"My lord, I have a letter from M. de Tremouille."

Lord Cornbury took the letter, and, walking a few paces to a clump of trees, read it carefully twice. He turned to Alastair with a face in which embarrassment strove with his natural kindness.

"Any friend of M. de Tremouille's is friend of mine, Captain Maclean. Show me how I can serve you. Your baggage is at the inn? It shall be brought here at once, for I would not forgive myself if one recommended to me by so old a friend slept at a public hostelry."

The young man bowed. "I will not refuse your hospitality, my lord, for I am here to beg an hour of most private conversation. I come not from France, but from the North."

A curious embarrassment twisted the other's face.

"You have the word?" he asked in a low voice.

"I am *Alcinous*, of whom I think you have been notified."

Lord Cornbury strode off a few steps and then came back. "Yes," he said simply, "I have been notified. I expected you a month back. But let me tell you, sir, you have arrived in a curst inconvenient hour. This house is full of Whiggish company. There is my sister Queensberry, and there is Mr. Murray, His Majesty's Solicitor. . . . Nay, perhaps the company is the better cloak for you. I will give you your private hour after supper. Meantime you are Captain Maclean—of Lee's Regiment, I think, in King Louis' service—and you have come from Paris from Paul de Tremouille on a matter of certain gems in my collection that he would purchase for the Duc de Bouillon. You are satisfied you can play that part, sir? Not a word of politics. You do not happen to be interested in statecraft, and you have been long an exile from your native country, though you have a natural sentiment for the old line of Kings. Is that clear, sir? Have you sufficient of the arts to pose as a virtuoso?"

Alastair hoped that he had.

"Then let us get the first plunge over. Suffer me to introduce you to the company."

The sound of their steps on the terrace halted the strollers. A lady turned, and at the sight of

the young man her eyebrows lifted. She was a slight figure about the middle size, whose walking clothes followed the new *bergère* fashion. Save for her huge hooped petticoats, she was the dainty milkmaid, in her flowered chintz, her sleeveless coat, her flat straw hat tied with ribbons of cherry velvet, her cambric apron. A long staff, with ribbons at the crook, proclaimed the shepherdess. She came toward them with a tripping walk, and Alastair marked the delicate bloom of her cheeks, unspoiled by rouge, the flash of white teeth as she smiled, the limpid depth of her great child-like eyes. His memory told him that the Duchess had passed her fortieth year, but his eyes saw a girl in her teens, a Flora of spring whose summer had not begun.

"Kitty, I present to you Captain Maclean, a gentleman in the service of His Majesty of France. He has come to me on a mission from Paul de Tremouille—a mission of the arts."

The lady held out a hand. "Are you by any happy chance a poet, sir?"

"I have made verses, madam, as young men do, but I halt far short of poetry."

"The inspiration may come. I had hoped that Harry would provide me with a new poet. For you must know, sir, that I have lost all my poets. Mr. Prior, Mr. Gay, Mr. Pope—they have all been gathered to the shades. I have no one now to make me verses."

"If your Grace will pardon me, your charms can never lack a singer."

“La, la! The singers are as dry as a ditch in midsummer. They sigh and gloom and write doleful letters in prose. I have to fly to Paris to find a well-turned sonnet. . . . Here we are so sage and dutiful and civically minded. Mary thinks only of her lovers, and Mr. Murray of his law-suits, and Mr. Kyd of his mortgage deeds, and Kit Lacy of fat cattle—nay, I do not think that Kit’s mind soars even to that height.”

“I protest, madam,” began a handsome sheepish young gentleman behind her, but the Duchess cut him short.

“Harry!” she cried, “we are all Scotch here—all but you and Kit, and to be Scotch nowadays is to be suspect. Let us plot treason. The King’s Solicitor cannot pursue us, for he will be *criminis particeps*.”

Mr. Murray, a small man with a noble head and features so exquisitely moulded that at first sight most men distrusted him, pointed to an inscription cut on the entablature of the house.

“*Deus haec nobis otia fecit*,” he read, in a voice whose every tone was clear as the note of a bell. “We dare not offend the *genius loci*, and outrage that plain commandment.”

“But treason is not business.”

“It is apt to be the most troublous kind of business, madam.”

“Then Kit shall show me the grottos.” She put an arm in the young man’s, the other in the young girl’s, and forced them to a pace which was ill suited to his high new hunting boots.

Alastair was formally introduced to the two men remaining, and had the chance of observing the one whom the Duchess had called Mr. Kyd. He had the look of a country squire, tall, heavily built, and deeply tanned by the sun. He had brown eyes, which regarded the world with a curious steadiness, and a mouth the corners of which were lifted in a perpetual readiness for laughter. Rarely had Alastair seen a more jovial and kindly face, which was yet redeemed from the commonplace by the straight thoughtful brows and the square cleft jaw. When the man spoke it was in the broad accents of the Scotch lowlands, though his words and phrases were those of the South. Lord Cornbury walked with Mr. Murray, and the other ranged himself beside Alastair.

“A pleasant habitation, you will doubtless be observing, sir. Since you’re from France you may have seen houses as grand, but there’s not the like of it in our poor kingdom of Scotland. In the Merse, which is my country-side, they stick the kitchen-midden up against the dining-room window, and their notion of a pleasance is a when grosart bushes and gillyflowers sore scarted by hens.”

Alastair looked round the flowery quincunx and the trim borders where a peacock was strutting amid late roses.

“I think I would tire of it. Give me a sea loch and the heather and a burn among birchwoods.”

“True, true, a man’s heart is in his calf-country. We Scots are like Ulysses, and not truly at home

in Phaeacia." He spoke the last word with the slightest lift of his eyebrows, as if signalling to the other that he was aware of his position. "For myself," he continued, "I'm aye remembering sweet Argos, which in my case is the inconsiderable dwelling of Greyhouses in a Lammermoor glen. My business takes me up and down this land of England, and I tell you, sir, I wouldn't change my crow-step gables for all the mansions ever biggit. It's a queer quirk in us mercantile folk."

"You travel much?"

"I needs must, when I'm the principal doer of the Duke of Queensberry. My father was man of business to auld Duke James, and I heired the job with Duke Charles. If you serve a mighty prince, who is a duke and marquis in two kingdoms and has lands and messuages to conform, you're not much off the road. Horses' iron and shoe-leather are cheap in that service. But my pleasure is at home, where I can read my Horace and crack with my friends and catch trout in the Whitader."

Mr. Kyd's honest countenance and frank geniality might have led to confidences on Alastair's part, but at the moment Lord Cornbury rejoined them with word that dinner would be served in half an hour. As they entered the house, Alastair found himself beside his host and well behind the others.

"Who is this Mr. Kyd?" he whispered. "He mentioned Phaeacia, as if he knew my character."

Lord Cornbury's face wore an anxious look.

"He is my brother Queensberry's agent. But he is also one of you. You must know of him. He is *Menelaus*."

Alastair shook his head. "I landed from France only three weeks back, and know little of Mr. Secretary Murray's plans."

"Well, you will hear more of him. He is now on his way to Badminton, for he is said to have Beaufort's ear. His connection with my brother is a good shield. Lord! how I hate all this business of go-betweens and midnight conclaves!" He looked at his companion with a face so full of a quaint perplexity that Alastair could not forbear to laugh.

"We must creep before we can fly, my lord, in the most honest cause. But our wings are fledging well."

A footman led him to his room, which was in the old part of the house called the Leicester Wing, allotted to him, he guessed, because of its remoteness. His baggage had been brought from the inn, and a porcelain bath filled with hot water stood on the floor. He shaved, but otherwise made no more than a traveller's toilet, changing his boots for silk stockings and buckled shoes, and his bob for an ample tie-wig. The mirror showed a man not yet thirty, with small sharp features, high cheek bones, and a reddish tinge in skin and eyebrows. The eyes were of a clear, choleric blue, and the face, which was almost feminine in its contours, was made manly by a certain ruggedness and fire in its regard. His hands and feet were

curiously small for one with so deep a chest and sinewy limbs. He was neat and precise in person and movement, a little finical at first sight, till the observer caught his quick ardent gaze. A passionate friend, that observer would have pronounced him, and a most mischievous and restless enemy.

His Highland boyhood and foreign journeyings had not prepared him for the suave perfection of an English house. The hall, paved with squares of black and white marble, was hung with full-length pictures of the Hyde and Danvers families, and the great figures of the Civil War. The party assembled beneath them was a motley of gay colours—the Duchess in a gown of sky-blue above rose-pink petticoats ; the young girl, whose name was Lady Mary Capell, all in green like a dryad ; Mr. Murray wore black velvet with a fuller wig than was the fashion of the moment ; while Sir Christopher Lacy had donned the blue velvet and ermine collar of the Duke of Beaufort's Hunt, a garb in which its members were popularly believed to sleep. Mr. Kyd had contented himself with a flowered waistcoat, a plum-coloured coat, and saffron stockings. Only the host was in sad colours, and, as he alone wore his natural hair, he presented a meagre and dejected figure in the flamboyant company.

The Duchess talked like a brook.

“Harry must show you the Vandykes,” she told Mr. Murray. “He knows the age and tale of every one as I know my boys’ birthdays. I

wish he would sell them, for they make me feel small and dingy. Look at them! We are no better than valets-de-chambre in their presence."

The major-domo conducted them to dinner, which was served in the new Indian Room. On the walls was a Chinese paper of birds and flowers and flower-hung pagodas; no pictures adorned them, but a number of delicately carved mirrors; and at intervals tall lacquer cabinets glowed on their gilt pedestals. The servants wore purple ("like bishops," Mr. Kyd whispered), and, since the room looked west, the declining October sun brought out the colours of wall and fabric and set the glasses and decanters shimmering on the polished table. Through the open windows the green slopes of the park lay bathed in light, and a pool of water sparkled in the hollow.

To Alastair, absorbed in his errand, the scene was purely phantasmal. He looked on as at a pretty pageant, heard the ladies' tinkling laughter, discussed the *manège* in France at long range with Lord Cornbury, who was a noted horsemaster, answered Lady Mary's inquiries about French modes as best he could, took wine with the men, had the honour to toast the Duchess Kitty—but did it all in a kind of waking dream. This daintiness and ease were not of that grim world from which he had come, or of that grimmer world which was soon to be. . . . He noticed that no word of politics was breathed; even the Duchess's chatter was discreet on that point. The ice was clearly too thin, and the most heedless felt the

need of wary walking. Here sat the King's Solicitor, and the wife of a Whig Duke cheek by jowl with two secret messengers bearing names out of Homer, and at the head of the table was one for whom both parties angled. The last seemed to feel the irony, for behind his hospitable gaiety was a sharp edge of care. He would sigh now and then, and pass a thin hand over his forehead. But the others—Mr. Solicitor was discussing Mr. Pope's "Characters of Women" and quoting unpublished variants. No hint of embarrassment was to be detected in that mellow voice. Was he perhaps, thought Alastair, cognizant of the strange mixture at table, and not disapproving? He was an officer of the Government, but he came of Jacobite stock. Was he not Stormont's brother? . . . And Mr. Kyd was deep in a discussion about horses with the gentleman in the Beaufort uniform. With every glass of claret the even rosiness of his face deepened, till he bloomed like the God of Wine himself—a Bacchus strictly sober, with very wide-awake eyes.

Then to complete the comedy the catch he had heard on Otmoor began to run in Alastair's head. *Three naked men we be*—a far cry from this bedecked and cosseted assemblage. He had a moment of suffocation, until he regained his humour. They were all naked under their fine clothes, and for one of them it was his business to do the stripping. He caught Lord Cornbury's eye and marked its gentle sadness. Was such a man content? Had he the assurance in his soul

to listen to one who brought to him not peace but swords ?

The late autumn afternoon was bright and mild, with a thin mist rising from the distant stream. The company moved out-of-doors, where on a gravelled walk stood a low carriage drawn by a pair of cream-coloured ponies. A maid brought the Duchess a wide straw hat and driving gloves, and, while the others loitered at the garden door, the lady chose her companion. "*Sa singularité*," Mr. Murray whispered. "It is young Mr. Walpole's name for her. But how prettily she plays the rustic !"

"Who takes the air with me ?" she cried. "I choose Captain Maclean. He is the newest of you, and can tell me the latest scandal of Versailles."

It was like an equipage fashioned out of Chelsea porcelain, and as Alastair took his place beside her with his knees under a driving cloth of embroidered silk, he felt more than ever the sense of taking part in a play. She whipped up the ponies and they trotted out of the wrought-iron gates, which bounded the pleasance, into the wide spaces of the park. Her talk, which at first had been the agreeable prattle of dinner, to which he responded with sufficient ease, changed gradually to interrogatories. With some disquiet he realized that she was drifting towards politics.

"What do they think in France of the young man's taste in womankind ?" she asked.

He raised his eyebrows.

“The Prince—Charles Stuart—the Chevalier. What of Jenny Cameron ? ”

“We heard nothing of her in Paris, madam. You should be the better informed, for he has been some months on British soil.”

“Tush, we hear no truth from the North. But they say that she never leaves him, that she shares his travelling carriage. Is she pretty, I wonder ? Dark or fair ? ”

“That I cannot tell, but, whatever they be, her charms must be mature. I have heard on good authority that she is over forty years old.”

It did not need the Duchess’s merry laughter to tell him that he had been guilty of a *bêtise*. He blushed furiously.

“La, sir,” she cried, “you are ungallant. That is very much my own age, and the world does not call me matronly. I had thought you a courtier, but I fear—I gravely fear—you are an honest man.”

They were now on the west side of the park, where a road led downhill past what had once been a quarry, but was now carved into a modish wilderness. The scarps of stone had been fashioned into grottos and towers and fantastic pinnacles ; shrubs had been planted to make shapely thickets ; springs had been turned to cascades or caught in miniature lakes. The path wound through midget Alps, which were of the same scale and quality as the chaise and the cream ponies and the shepherdess Duchess.

“We call this spot Eden,” she said. “There

are many things I would fain ask you, sir, but I remember the consequence of Eve's inquisitiveness and forbear. The old Eden had a door and beyond that door lay the desert. It is so here."

They turned a corner by the edge of a small lake and came on a stout palisade which separated the park from Wychwood Forest. Through the high deer-gate Alastair looked on a country the extreme opposite of the enclosed paradise. The stream, which in the park was regulated like a canal, now flowed in rough shallows or spread into morasses. Scrub clothed the slopes, scrub of thorn and hazel and holly, with now and then an ancient oak flinging gnarled arms against the sky. In the bottom were bracken and the withered blooms of heather, where bees still hummed. The eye looked up little glens towards distant ridges to which the blue October haze gave the air of high hills.

As Alastair gazed at the scene he saw again his own country-side. These were like the wild woods that cloaked Loch Sunart side, the wind brought him the same fragrance of heath and fern, he heard the croak of a raven, a knot of hinds pushed from the coppice and plashed through a marshy shallow. For a second his eyes filled with tears.

He found the Duchess's hand on his. It was a new Duchess, with grave kind face and no hint of petulance at her lips or artifice in her voice.

"I brought you here for a purpose, sir," she said. "You have before you two worlds—the enclosed garden and the wild beyond. The wild

is yours, by birthright and training and choice. Beyond the pale is Robin Hood's land, where men adventure. Inside is a quiet domain where they make verses and read books and cherish possessions—my brother's land. Does my parable touch you ? ”

“ The two worlds are one, madam—one in God's sight.”

“ In God's sight, maybe, but not in man's. I will be plainer still with you. I do not know your business, nor do I ask it, for you are my brother's friend. But he is my darling, and I fear a threat to his peace as a mother-partridge fears the coming of a hawk. Somehow—I ask no questions—you would persuade him to break bounds and leave his sanctuary for the wilds. It may be the manlier choice, but oh, sir, it is not for him. He is meant for the garden. His health is weak, his spirit is most noble but too fine for the clash of the rough world. In a year he would be in his grave.”

Alastair, deeply perplexed, made no answer. He could not lie to this woman, nor could he make a confidante of the wife of Queensberry.

“ Pardon me if I embarrass you,” she went on. “ I do not ask a reply. Your secrets would be safe with me, but if you told me them I should stop my ears. For politics I care nothing, I know nothing. I speak on a brother's behalf, and my love for him makes me importunate. I tell you that he is made for the pleasance, not for the wilderness. Will you weigh my words ? ”

"I will weigh them most scrupulously. Lord Cornbury is blessed in his sister."

"I am all he has, for he never could find a wife to his taste." She whipped up the ponies and her voice changed to its old lightness. "La, sir, we must hasten. The gentlemen will be clamouring for tea."

In the great gallery, among more Vandykes and Knellers and Lelys and panels of Mortlake tapestry, the company sipped tea and chocolate. The Duchess made tea with her own hands, and the bright clothes and jewels gleaming in the dusk against dim pictures had once more the airy unreality of a dream. But Alastair's mood had changed. He no longer felt imprisoned among potent shadows, for the glimpse he had of his own familiar country had steadied his balance. He saw the life he had chosen in fairer colours, the life of toil and hazard and enterprise, in contrast with this airless ease. The blood ran quicker in his veins for the sight of a drugged and sleeping world. Ancient possessions, the beauty of women, the joy of the senses were things to be forsworn before they could be truly admired. Now he looked graciously upon what an hour ago had irked him.

When the candles were lit and the curtains drawn the scene grew livelier. The pretty Lady Mary, sitting under the Kneller portrait of her mother, was a proof of the changelessness of beauty. A pool was made at commerce, in which all joined, and the Duchess's childlike laughter

rippled through the talk like a trout-stream. She was in her wildest mood, the incomparable Kitty whom for thirty years every poet had sung. The thing became a nursery party, where discretion was meaningless, and her irreverent tongue did not refrain from politics. She talked of the Stuarts.

"They intermarried with us," she cried, "so I can speak as a kinswoman. A grave dutiful race—they were tragically misunderstood. If their passions were fierce, they never permitted them to bias their statecraft."

A portrait of Mary of Scots hung above her as she spoke. Mr. Murray cast a quizzical eye upon it.

"Does your summary embrace that ill-fated lady?" he asked.

"She above all. Her frailties were not Stuart but Tudor. Consider Harry the Eighth. He had passions like other monarchs, but instead of keeping mistresses he must marry each successive love, and as a consequence cut off the head of the last one. His craze was not for amours but for matrimony. So, too, with his sister Margaret. So, too, with his great-niece Mary. She might have had a hundred lovers and none would have gainsaid her, but the mischief came when she insisted on wedding them. No! No! What ruined the fortunes of my kinsfolk was not the Stuart blood but the Tudor—the itch for lawful wedlock which came in with the Welsh bourgeoisie."

"Your Grace must rewrite the histories," said Mr. Murray, laughing.

"I have a mind to. But my Harry will bear me witness. The Stuart stock is sad and dutiful. Is not that the character of him who now calls himself the rightful King of England ? "

"So I have heard it said," Lord Cornbury answered, but the eyes which looked at his sister were disapproving.

The ladies went early to bed, after nibbling a sweet biscuit and sipping a glass of negus. Supper was laid for the gentlemen in the dining-room, and presently Mr. Murray, Mr. Kyd, and Sir Christopher Lacy were seated at a board which they seemed to have no intention of leaving. Alastair excused himself on the plea of fatigue, and lit a bedroom candle. "I will come to your room," his host whispered as they crossed the hall. "Do not undress. We will talk in my little cabinet."

The young man flung himself into a chair, and collected his thoughts. He had been chosen for this mission, partly because of his address and education, but mainly because of the fierce ardour which he had hitherto shown in the Prince's cause. He knew that much hung on his success, for Cornbury, though nothing of a soldier and in politics no more than Member of Parliament for the University of Oxford, was so beloved that his adherence would be worth a regiment. He knew his repute. Such a man would not quibble in matters of principle ; the task was rather to transform apathy into action. He remembered the Duchess's words—honest words, doubtless, but not weighty. Surely in so great a test of honour a man could not hesi-

tate because his health was weak or his home dear to him.

There was a knock at the door and Lord Cornbury entered with a silk dressing-gown worn over his clothes. He looked round the room with his sad restless eyes.

“Here Lord Leicester died—Elizabeth’s favourite. They say that when the day of his death comes round his spirit may be heard tapping at the walls. It is a commentary on mortal ambition, Captain Maclean. Come with me to my cabinet. Mr. Solicitor is gone to bed, for he is ready enough for an all-night sitting at St. James’s among the wits, but has no notion of spoiling his sleep by potations among bumpkins. Kit Lacy and Mr. Kyd will keep it up till morning, but happily they are at the other end of the house.”

He led the way down a narrow staircase to a little room on the ground floor, which had for its other entrance a door giving on a tiny paved garden. It was lined with books and a small fire had been lit on the hearth.

“Here we shall be secure, for I alone have the keys,” Lord Cornbury said, taking a seat by a bureau where the single lamp was behind his head. “You have something private for my ear? I must tell you, sir, I have been plagued for many months by portentous secret emissaries. There was my lord Clancarty, a Cyclops with one eye and a shocking perruque, who seemed to me not wholly in possession of his wits. There was a Scotch gentleman—Bahaldy—Bohaldy—whom I

suspected of being a liar. There was Traquair, whose speech rang false in every stutter. They and their kind were full of swelling words, but they were most indisputably fools. You are not of their breed, sir. From you I look for candour and good sense. What have you to say to me ? ”

“ One thing only, my lord. From me you will get no boasts or promises. I bring you a summons.”

Alastair took from his breast a letter. Lord Cornbury broke the seal and revealed a page of sprawling irregular handwriting, signed at the foot with the words “ Charles P.” He read it with attention, read it again, and then looked at the messenger.

“ His Royal Highness informs me that I will be ‘ inexcusable before God and men ’ if I fail him. For him that is a natural opinion. Now, sir, before answering this appeal, I have certain questions to ask you. You come from the Prince’s army, and you are in the secrets of his Cabinet. You are also a soldier. I would hear from you the Prince’s strength.”

“ He can cross the Border with not less than five thousand horse and foot.”

“ Highlanders ? ”

“ In the main, which means the best natural fighting stock in this land. They have already shown their prowess against Cope’s regulars. There are bodies of Lowland horse with Elcho and Pitsligo.”

“ And your hopes of increment ? ”

“ More than half the clans are still to raise. Of them we are certain. There are accessions to be looked for from the Lowlands. In England we have promises from every quarter—from Barrymore, Molyneux, Grosvenor, Fenwick, Petre, Cholmondeley, Leigh, Curzon in the North ; from the Duke of Beaufort and Sir Watkin Wynn in the West. Likewise large sums of money are warranted from the city of London.”

“ You speak not of sympathy only, but of troops ? Many are no doubt willing to drink His Royal Highness’s health.”

“ I speak of troops. There is also the certain aid from France. In this paper, my lord, you will find set down the numbers and dates of troops to be dispatched before Christmas. Some are already on the way—Lord John Drummond with his regiment of Royal Ecossais and certain Irish companies from the French service.”

“ And you have against you ? ”

“ In Scotland—nothing. In England at present not ten thousand men. Doubtless they will make haste to bring back troops from abroad, but before that we hope to conquer. His Royal Highness’s plan is clear. He seeks as soon as possible to win a victory in England. In his view the land is for the first comer. The nation is indifferent and will yield to boldness. I will be honest with you, my lord. He hopes also to confirm the loyalty of France, for it is certain that if his arms triumph but once on English soil, the troops of King Louis will take the sea.”

The other mused. "It is a bold policy, but it may be a wise one. I would raise one difficulty. You have omitted from your calculations the British Fleet."

Alastair shrugged his shoulders. "It is our prime danger, but we hope with speed and secrecy to outwit it."

"I have another objection. You are proposing to conquer England with a foreign army. I say not a word against the valour of your Highland countrymen, but to English eyes they are barbarous strangers. And France is the ancient enemy."

"Then, my lord, it is a strife of foreigner against foreigner. Are King George's Dutch and Danes and Hessians better Englishmen than the Prince's men? Let England abide the issue, and join the victor."

"You speak reasonably, I do not deny it. Let me ask further. Has any man of note joined your standard?"

"Many Scots nobles, though not the greatest. But Hamilton favours us, and there are grounds for thinking that even the Whig dukes, Argyll and Montrose and Queensberry, are soured with the Government. It is so in England, my lord. Bedford . . ."

"I know, I know. All are waiting on the tide. But meantime His Royal Highness's Cabinet is a rabble of Irishmen. Is it not so? I do not like to have Teague in the business, sir, and England does not like it."

"Then come yourself, my lord."

Lord Cornbury smiled. "I have not finished my questions. What of his Royal Highness's religion? I take it that it is the same as your own."

"He has already given solemn pledges for liberty and toleration. Many Presbyterians of the straitest sect are in his camp. Be sure, my lord, that he will not be guilty of his grandfather's blunder."

Lord Cornbury rose and stood with his back to the fire.

"You are still in the military stage, where your first duty is a victory in the field. What does His Royal Highness wish me to do? I am no soldier. I could not raise a dozen grooms and foresters. I do not live in Sir Watkin's county, where you can blow a horn and summon a hundred rascals. Here in Oxfordshire we are peaceable folk."

"He wants you in his Council. I am no lover of the Irish, and there is sore need of statesmanship among us."

"Say you want me for an example."

"That is the truth, my lord."

"And, you would add, for statecraft. Then let us look at the matter with a statesman's eye. You say truly that England does not love her Government. She is weary of foreign wars, and an alien Royal house, and gross taxes, and corruption in high places. She is weary, I say, but she will not stir to shift the burden. You are

right ; she is for the first comer. You bring a foreign army and it will fight what in the main is a foreign army, so patriotic feeling is engaged on neither side. If you win, the malcontents, who are the great majority, will join you, and His Royal Highness will sit on the throne of his fathers. If you fail, there is no loss except to yourselves, for the others are not pledged. Statesmanship, sir, is an inglorious thing, for it must consider first the fortunes of the common people. No statesman has a right to risk these fortunes unless he be reasonably assured of success. Therefore I say to you that England must wait, and statesmen must wait with England, till the issue is decided. That issue still lies with the soldiers. I cannot join His Royal Highness at this juncture, for I could bring no aid to his cause and I might bring needless ruin to those who depend on me. My answer might have been otherwise had I been a soldier."

A certain quiet obstinacy had entered the face which was revealed in profile by the lamp on the bureau. The voice had lost its gentle indeterminateness and rang crisp and clear. Alastair had knowledge enough of men to recognize finality. He made his last effort.

"Are considerations of policy the only ones ? You and I share the same creeds, my lord. Our loyalty is owed to the House which has the rightful succession, and we cannot in our obedience to God serve what He has not ordained. Is it not your duty to fling prudence to the winds and

make your election before the world, for right is right whether we win or lose."

"For some men maybe," said the other sadly, "but not for me. I am in that position that many eyes are turned on me and in my decision I must consider them. If your venture fails, I desire that as few Englishmen as possible suffer for it, it being premised that for the moment only armed men can help it to success. Therefore I wait, and will counsel waiting to all in like position. Beaufort can bring troops, and in God's name I would urge him on, and from the bottom of my heart I pray for the Prince's welfare."

"What will decide you, then?"

"A victory on English soil. Nay, I will go farther. So soon as His Royal Highness is in the way of that victory, I will fly to his side."

"What proof will you require?"

"Ten thousand men south of Derby on the road to London, and the first French contingent landed."

"That is your answer, my lord?"

"That is the answer which I would have you convey with my most humble and affectionate duty to His Royal Highness. . . . And now, sir, will you join me in a turn on the terrace, as the night is fine? It is my habit before retiring."

The night was mild and very dark, and from the lake rose the honk of wild fowl and from the woods the fitful hooting of owls. To Alastair his failure was scarcely a disappointment, for he realized that all day he had lived in expectation of it. Nay, inasmuch as it placed so solemn a duty upon

the soldiers of the Cause, it strung his nerves like a challenge. Lord Cornbury put an arm in his, and the sign of friendship moved the young man's affection. It was for youth and ardour such as his to make clear the path for gentler souls.

They left the stones of the terrace and passed the lit window of the dining-room, where it appeared that merriment had advanced, for Sir Christopher Lacy was attempting a hunting-song.

"Such are the squires of England," whispered Cornbury. "They will drink and dice and wench for the Prince, but not fight for him."

"Not yet," Alastair corrected. "But when your lordship joins us he will not be unattended."

They reached the corner of the house from which in daylight the great avenue could be seen, the spot where that morning Alastair had delivered his credentials.

"I hear hooves," said Cornbury, with a hand to his ear. "Nay, it is only the night wind."

"It is a horse," said the other. "I have heard it for the last minute. Now it is entering the courtyard. See, there is a stable lantern."

A light swayed, and there was the sound of human speech.

"That is Kyd's Scotch servant," Cornbury said. "Let us inquire into the errand of this night-rider."

As they moved towards the lantern a commotion began, and the light wavered like a ship's lamp in a heavy sea.

"Haud up, sir," cried a voice. "Losh, the beast's foundered, and the man's in a dwam."

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH PRIVATE MATTERS CUT ACROSS AFFAIRS OF STATE

IN the circle of the lantern's light the horseman, a big shambling fellow, stood swaying as if in extreme fatigue, now steadying himself by a hand on the animal's neck, now using the support of the groom's shoulder. His weak eyes peered and blinked, and at the sight of the gentlemen he made an attempt at a bow.

"My lord!" he gasped with a dry mouth. "Do I address my lord Cornbury?"

He did not wait for an answer. "I am from Chastlecote, my lord. I beg—I supplicate—a word with your lordship."

"Now?"

"Now, if it please you. My business is most urgent. It is life or death, my lord, the happiness or despair of an immortal soul."

"You are the tutor from Chastlecote, I think. You appear to have been trying your beast high."

"I have ridden to Weston and to Heythrop since midday."

"Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast, my lord." The man's eyes were wolfish with hunger and weariness.

"Then you shall eat, for there can be no business between a full man and a fasting. The groom will see to your horse. Follow me."

Lord Cornbury led the way past the angle of the house to where the lit windows of the dining-room made a glow in the dark.

"'Tis a night of queer doings," he whispered to Alastair, as they heard the heavy feet of the stranger stumbling behind them. "We will surprise Kit Lacy in his cups, but there will be some remnants of supper for this fellow. 'Pon my soul, I am curious to know what has shifted such a gravity out of bed."

He unlocked the garden-door and led the way through the great hall to the dining-room. Sir Christopher, mellow but still sober, was interrupted in a song, and, with admirable presence of mind, cut it short in a view holloa. Mr. Kyd, rosy as the dawn, hastened to place chairs.

"Your pardon, gentlemen, but I bring you a famished traveller. Sit down, sir, and have at that pie. There is claret at your elbow."

The new-comer muttered thanks and dropped heavily into a chair. Under the bright candelabrum, among crystal and silver and shining fruit and the gay clothes of the others, he cut an outrageous figure. He might have been in years about the age of Lord Cornbury, but disease and rough usage had wiped every sign of youth from his face. That face was large, heavily-featured and pitted deep with the scars of scrofula. The skin was puffy and grey, the eyes beneath the

prominent forehead were pale and weak, the mouth was cast in hard lines as if from suffering. His immense frame was incredibly lean and bony, and yet from his slouch seemed unwholesomely weighted with flesh. He wore his own hair, straight and lank and tied with a dusty ribbon. His clothes were of some coarse grey stuff and much worn, and, though on a journey, he had no boots, but instead clumsy unbuckled shoes and black worsted stockings. His cuffs and neckband were soiled, and overcrowded pockets made his coat hang on him like a sack. Such an apparition could not but affect the best-bred gentleman. Kit Lacy's mouth was drawn into a whistle, Mr. Kyd sat in smiling contemplation. Alastair thought of Simon Lovat as he had last seen that vast wallowing chieftain, and then reflected that Simon carried off his oddity by his air of arrogant command. This fellow looked as harassed as a mongrel that boys have chivvied into a corner. He cut himself a wedge of pie and ate gobblingly. He poured out a tankard of claret and swallowed most of it at a gulp. Then he grew nervous, choked on a crumb, gulped more claret and coughed till his pale face grew crimson.

The worst pangs of hunger allayed, he seemed to recollect his errand. His lips began to mutter as if he were preparing a speech. His tired eyes rested in turn on each member of the company, on Lacy and Kyd lounging at the other side of the table, on Cornbury's decorous figure at the head, on Alastair wrapped in his own thoughts

at the foot. This was not the private conference he had asked for, but it would appear that the urgency of his need must override discretion. A spasm of pain distorted the huge face, and he brought his left hand down violently on the table, so that the glasses shivered.

"My lord," he said, "she is gone."

The company stared, and Sir Christopher tittered.

"Who is your 'she,' sir?" he asked as he helped himself to wine.

"Miss Grevel . . . Miss Claudia."

The young baronet's face changed.

"The devil! Gone! Explain yourself, sir."

The man had swung round so that he faced Lord Cornbury, with his head screwed oddly over his right shoulder. As he spoke it bobbed in a kind of palsied eagerness.

"You know her, my lord. Miss Claudia Grevel; the cousin and housemate of the young heir of Chastlecote, who has been committed to my charge. Three days ago she was of age and the controller of her fortune. This morning the maids found her bed unslept in, and the lady flown."

Lord Cornbury exclaimed. "Did she leave no word?" he asked.

"Only a letter to her cousin, bidding him farewell."

"Nothing to you?"

"To me nothing. She was a high lady and to her I was only the boy's instructor. But I had marked for some weeks a restlessness in her de-

portment and, fearing some rash step, I had kept an eye on her doings."

"You spied on her?" said Kyd sweetly. "Is that part of an usher's duties?"

The man was too earnest to feel the rudeness of the question.

"She was but a child, sir," he said. "She had neither father nor mother, and she was about to be sole mistress of a rich estate. I pitied her, and, though she in no way condescended to me, I loved her youth and beauty."

"You did right," Lord Cornbury said. "Have your observations given you no clue to the secret of her flight?"

"In some measure, my lord. You must know that Miss Grevel is ardent in politics, and, like many gentlewomen, has a strong sentiment for the young Prince now in Scotland. She has often declared that if she had been a man she would long ago have hastened to his standard, and she was wont to rage against the apathy of the Oxfordshire squires. A scrap of news from the North would put her into a fury or an exaltation. There was one gentleman of the neighbourhood who was not apathetic and who was accordingly most welcome at Chastlecote. From him she had her news of the Prince, and it was clear by his manner towards her that he valued her person as well as shared her opinions. I have been this day to that gentleman's house and found that at an early hour he started on a journey. I was ill received there and told little, but I ascertained that he

had departed with a coach and led horses. My lord, I am convinced that the unhappy girl is his companion."

"The man's name?" Lord Cornbury asked sharply.

"Sir John Norreys of Weston."

The name told nothing to two of the company, but it had a surprising effect on Sir Christopher Lacy. He sprang to his feet, and began to stride up and down the room, his chin on his breast.

"I knew his father," said Lord Cornbury, "but the young man I have rarely seen. 'Tis a run-away match doubtless; but such marriages are not always tragical. Miss Grevel is too highly placed and well dowered for misadventure. Let us hope for the best, sir. She will return presently a sober bride."

"I am of your lordship's opinion," Mr. Kyd observed with a jolly laugh. "Let a romantic maid indulge her fancy and choose her own way of wedlock, for if she get not romance at the start she will not find it in the dreich business of matrimony. But you and me, my lord, are bachelors and speak only from hearsay."

The tutor from Chastlecote seemed to be astounded at the reception of his news.

"You do not know the man," he cried. "It is no case of a youthful escapade. I have made inquiries, and learned that he is no better than a knave. If he is a Jacobite it is for gain, if he weds Miss Grevel it is for her estate."

"Now what the devil should a dominie like you

know about the character of a gentleman of family ? ”

The words were harsh, but, as delivered by Mr. Kyd with a merry voice and a twinkle of the eye, they might have passed as a robust pleasantry. But the tutor was not in the mood for them. Anger flushed his face, and he blew out his breath like a bull about to charge. Before he could reply, however, he found an ally in Sir Christopher. The baronet flung himself again into his chair and stuck both elbows on the table.

“The fellow is right all the same,” he said. “Jack Norreys is a low hound, and I’ll take my oath on it. No scamp is Jack, for his head is always cool and he has a heart like a codfish. He has a mighty good gift for liquor—I say that for him—but the damnable fellow profits by the generous frailties of his betters. He is mad for play, but he loves the cards like an attorney, not like a gentleman, and he makes a fat thing out of them. No, damme! Jack’s no true man. If he wants the girl ’tis for her fortune, and if he sings Jacobite, ’tis because he sees some scoundrelly profit for himself. I hate the long nose and the mean eyes of him.”

“You hear ? ” cried the tutor who had half risen from his seat in his excitement. “You hear the verdict of an honest man ! ”

“You seem to know him well, Kit,” said Lord Cornbury, smiling.

“Know him ! Gad, I have had some chances. We were birched together at Eton, and dwelt in

the same stairway at Christ Church. I once rode a match with him on the Port Meadow and bled him for a hundred guineas, but he has avenged himself a thousandfold since then at the Bibury meetings. He may be Lord High Chancellor when I am in the Fleet, but the Devil will get him safe enough at the end."

Lord Cornbury looked grave, Mr. Kyd wagged a moralizing head.

"The thing has gone too far to stop," said the former. Then to the tutor: "What would you have me do?"

The visitor's uncouth hands were twisting themselves in a frenzy of appeal.

"My mistress at Chastlecote is old and bed-ridden, my charge is but a boy, and Miss Grevel has no relatives nearer than Dorset. I come to you as the leading gentleman in this shire and an upright and public-spirited nobleman, and I implore you to save that poor pretty child from her folly. They have gone north, so let us follow. It may not be too late to prevent the marriage."

"Ah, but it will be," said Mr. Kyd. "They can find a hedge-parson any hour of the day to do the job for a guinea and a pot of ale."

"There is a chance, a hope, and, oh sir, I beseech you to pursue it."

"Would you have me mount and ride on the track of the fugitives?" Lord Cornbury asked.

"Yes, my lord, and without delay. Grant me a chair to sleep an hour in, and I am ready for any labour. We can take the road before day-

break. It would facilitate our task if your lordship would lend me a horse better fitted for my weight."

The naiveness of the request made a momentary silence. Then in spite of himself Alastair laughed. This importunate usher was on the same mission as himself, that mission which an hour earlier had conclusively failed. To force their host into activity was the aim of both, but one whom a summons from a Prince had not moved was not likely to yield to an invitation to pursue a brace of green lovers. Yet he respected the man's ardour, though he had set him down from his looks as a boor and an oddity; and regretted his laugh, when a distraught face was turned towards him, solemn and reproachful like a persecuted dog's.

Lord Cornbury's eyes were troubled and his hands fidgeted with a dish of filberts. He seemed divided between irritation at a preposterous demand and his natural kindliness.

"You are a faithful if importunate friend, sir. By the way, I have not your name."

"Johnson, my lord—Samuel Johnson. But my name matters nothing."

"I have heard it before. . . . Nay, I remember. . . . Was it Mr. Murray who spoke of it? Tell me, sir, have you not published certain writings?"

"Sir, I have made a living by scribbling."

"Poetry, I think. Was there not a piece on the morals of Town—in the manner of Juvenal?"

"Bawdy, I'll be bound," put in Mr. Kyd. He

seemed suddenly to have grown rather drunk and spoke with a hiccough.

The tutor looked so uncouth a figure for a poet that Alastair laughed again. But the poor man's mind was far from humour, for his earnestness increased with his hearers' cynicism.

"Oh, my lord," he cried, "what does it matter what I am or what wretched books I have fathered? I urge you to a most instant duty—to save a noble young lady from a degrading marriage. I press for your decision, for the need is desperate."

"But what can I do, Mr. Johnson? She is of age, and they have broken no law. I cannot issue a warrant and hale them back to Oxfordshire. If they are not yet wed I have no authority to dissuade, for I am not a kinsman, not even a friend. I cannot forbid the banns, for I have no certain knowledge of any misdeeds of this Sir John. I have no *locus*, as the lawyers say, for my meddling. But in any case the errand must be futile, for if you are right and she has fled with him, they will be married long ere we can overtake them. What you ask from me is folly."

The tutor's face changed from lumpish eagerness to a lumpish gloom.

"There is a chance," he muttered. "And in the matter of saving souls a chance is enough for a Christian."

"Then my Christianity falls short of yours, sir," replied Lord Cornbury sharply.

The tutor let his dismal eyes dwell on the others.

They soon left Mr. Kyd's face, stayed longer on Alastair's and came to rest on Sir Christopher's, which was little less gloomy than his own.

"You, sir," he said, "you know the would-be bridegroom. Will you assist me to rescue the bride?"

The baronet for a moment did not reply and hope flickered in the other's eyes. Then it died, for the young man brought down his fist on the table with an oath.

"No, by God. If my lord thinks the business not for him, 'tis a million times too delicate for me. You're an honest man, Mr. usher, and shall hear my reason. I loved Miss Grevel, and for two years I dared to hope. Last April she dismissed me and I had the wit to see that 'twas final. What kind of figure would I cut galloping the shires after a scornful mistress who has chosen another? I'd ride a hundred miles to see Jack Norreys' neck wrung, but you will not catch me fluttering near the honeypot of his lady."

"You think only of your pride, sir, and not of the poor girl."

The tutor, realizing the futility of his mission, rose to his feet, upsetting a decanter with an awkward elbow. The misadventure, which at an earlier stage would have acutely embarrassed him, now passed unnoticed. He seemed absorbed in his own reflections, and had suddenly won a kind of rude dignity. As he stood among them Alastair was amazed alike at his shabbiness and his self-possession.

"You will stay the night here, sir ? The hour is late and a bed is at your disposal."

"I thank you, my lord, but my duties do not permit of sleep. I return to Chastlecote, and if I can get no helpers I must e'en seek for the lady alone. I am debtor to your lordship for a hospitality upon which I will not further encroach. May I beg the favour of a light to the stable ? "

Alastair picked up a branched candlestick and preceded the tutor into the windless night. The latter stumbled often, for he seemed purblind, but the other had no impulse to laugh, for toward this grotesque he had conceived a curious respect. The man, like himself, was struggling against fatted ease, striving to break a fence of prudence on behalf of an honourable hazard.

Kyd's servant brought the horse, refreshed by a supper of oats, and it was Alastair's arm which helped the unwieldy horseman to the saddle.

"God prosper you ! " Alastair said, as he fitted a clumsy foot into a stirrup.

The man woke to the consciousness of the other's presence.

"You wish me well, sir ? Will you come with me ? I desire a colleague, for I am a sedentary man with no skill in travel."

"I only rest here for a night. I am a soldier on a mission which does not permit of delay."

"Then God speed us both ! " The strange fellow pulled off his hat like a parson pronouncing benediction, before he lumbered into the dark of the avenue.

Alastair turned to find Kyd behind him. He was exchanging jocularities with his servant.

“Saw ye ever such a physiog, Edom?” he cried. “Dominies are getting crouse, for the body was wanting my lord to up and ride with him like a post-boy after some quean that’s ta’en the jee. He’s about as blate as a Cameronian preacher. My lord was uncommon patient with him. D’you not think so, Captain Maclean?”

“The man may be uncouth, but he has a stout heart and a very noble spirit. I take off my hat to his fidelity.”

The reply changed Mr. Kyd’s mood from scorn to a melting sentiment.

“Ay, but you’re right. I hadn’t thought of that. It’s a noble-hearted creature, and we would all be better if we were liker him. Courage, did you say? The man with that habit of body, that jogs all day on a horse for the sake of a woman that has done nothing but clout his lugs, is a hero. I wish I had drunk his health.”

CHAPTER IV

MR. KYD OF GREYHOUSES

NEXT morning Alastair rode west, and for the better part of a fortnight was beyond Severn. He met Sir Watkin at Wynnstay and Mr. Savage in Lanthony vale, and then penetrated to the Pembroke coast where he conferred with fisherfolk and shy cloaked men who gave appointments by the tide at nightfall. His task was no longer diplomacy, but the ordinary intelligence service of war, and he was the happier inasmuch as he the better understood it. If fortune favoured elsewhere, he had made plans for a French landing in a friendly country-side to kindle the West and take in flank the defences of London. Now, that errand done, his duty was with all speed to get him back to the North.

On a sharp noon in the first week of November he recrossed Severn and came into Worcestershire, having slept at Ludlow the night before. His plan was to return as he had come, by the midlands and Northumberland, for he knew the road and which inns were safe to lie at. Of the doings of his Prince he had heard nothing, and he fretted every hour at the lack of news. As a

trained soldier with some experience of war, he distrusted profoundly the military wisdom of Charles's advisers, and feared daily to hear of some blunder which would cancel all that had already been won.

He rode hard, hoping to sleep in Staffordshire and next day join the road which he had travelled south three weeks before. An unobtrusive passenger, known to none, knowing none, he took little pains to scan the visages of those he met. It was therefore with some surprise that, as he sat in the tap-room of an ale-house at Chifney, he saw a face which woke some recollection.

It was that of a tall, thin and very swarthy man who was engaged in grating a nutmeg into a pot of mulled ale. His clothes had the shabby finery of a broken-down gentleman, but the air of a minor stage-player which they suggested was sharply contradicted by his face. That was grave, strong almost to hardness, and with eyes that would have dictated if they had not brooded. He gave Alastair good-day as he entered, and then continued his occupation in such a way that the light from the window fell very clearly upon his features. The purpose, which involved a change of position, was so evident that Alastair's attention was engaged, and he regarded him over the edge of his tankard.

The memory was baffling. France, London, Rome—he fitted nowhere. It seemed a far-back recollection, and not a coincidence of his present journey. Then the man raised his head, and his

sad eyes looked for a moment at the window. The gesture Alastair had seen before—very long before—in Morvern. Into the picture swam other details : a ketch anchored, a sea-loch, a seafarer who sang so that the heart broke, a cluster of boys huddled on hot sand listening to a stranger's tales.

“ The Spainneach ! ” he exclaimed.

The man looked up with a smile on his dark face and spoke in Gaelic. “ Welcome, heart's darling,” he said—the endearment used long ago to the child who swam out to the foreign ship for a prize of raisins. “ I have followed you for three days, and this morning was told of your inquiries, divined your route, and took a short cut to meet you here.”

The picture had filled out. Alastair remembered the swarthy foreigner who came yearly at the tail of the harvest to enlist young men for the armies of Spain or France or the Emperor—who did not brag or bribe or unduly gild the prospect, but who, less by his tongue than by his eyes, drew the Morvern youth to wars from which few returned. An honest man, his father had named this Spainneach, but as secret in his ways as the woodcock blown shoreward by the October gales.

“ You have a message for me ? ” he asked, thinking of Cornbury.

“ A message—but from a quarter no weightier than my own head. You have been over long in the South, Sir Sandy.” The name had been the title given by his boyish comrades to their leader,

and its use by this grave man brought to the chance meeting something of the intimacy of home.

"That's my own notion," he replied. "But I am now by way of curing the fault."

"Then ride fast, and ride by the shortest road. There's sore need of you up beyond."

"You have news," Alastair cried eagerly. "Has his Highness marched yet?"

"This very day he has passed the Border."

"How—by what route—in what strength?"

"No great increase. He looks for that on the road."

"Then he goes by Carlisle?"

The Spaniard nodded. "And Wade lies at Newcastle," he said.

Alastair brought down his fist on the board so hard that the ale lipped from the other's tankard.

"The Devil take such blundering! Now he has the enemy on his unprotected flank, when he might have destroyed him and won that victory on English soil which is the key to all things. Wade is old and doited, but he will soon have Cumberland behind him. Who counselled this foolishness? Not his Highness, I'll warrant."

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders. "No. His Highness would have made a bee-line for Newcastle. But his captains put their faith in Lancashire, and would have the honest men of North England in their ranks before they risked a battle. They picture them as waiting, each with a thousand armed followers, till the first

tartans are south of Shap, and then rushing to the standard."

Alastair, his brows dark with irritation, strode up and down the floor.

"The fools have it the wrong way round. England will not rise to fight a battle, but only when a battle has been won. Wade at Newcastle was a sovran chance—and we have missed it. Blind! Blind! You are right, my friend. Not a second must I lose in pushing north to join my Prince. There are no trained soldiers with him save Lord George, and he had no more than a boyish year in the Royals. . . . You say he travels by Shap?"

The Spaniard nodded. "And your course, Sir Sandy, must be through West England. Ride for Preston, which all Scots invasions must pass. Whitchurch — Tarporley — Warrington are your stages. See, I will make you a plan."

On the dust of a barrel he traced the route, while Alastair did up the straps of his coat and drew on his riding gloves. His horse was brought, the lawing paid, and as the young man mounted the other stood by his stirrup.

"Where do you go?" Alastair asked.

"Northward, like swallows in spring. But not yet awhile. I have still errands in these parts."

An ostler inspected the horse's shoes, and Alastair sat whistling impatiently through his teeth. The tune which came to him was Midwinter's catch of "The Naked Men." The Spaniard started at the sound, and long after Alastair had moved off stood staring after him down the road.

Then he turned to the house, his own lips shaping the same air, and cast a glance at the signboard. It showed a red dragon marvellously rampant on a field of green, and beneath was painted a rude device of an open eye.

The chill misty noontide changed presently to a chillier drizzle, and then to a persistent downfall. Alastair's eagerness was perforce checked by the weather, for he had much ado to grope his way in the maze of grassy lanes and woodland paths. Scarcely a soul was about—only a dripping labourer at a gate, and a cadger with pack-horses struggling towards the next change-house. He felt the solitude and languor of the rainy world, and at the same time his bones were on fire to make better speed, for suddenly the space between him and the North seemed to have lengthened intolerably. The flat meadows were hideously foreign; he longed for a sight of hill or heath to tell him that he was nearing the North and the army of his Prince. He cursed the errand that had brought him to this friendless land, far from his proper trade of war.

The November dusk fell soon, and wet greyness gave place to wet mirk. There was no moon, and to continue was to risk a lost road and a foundered horse. So, curbing his impatience, he resolved to lie the night at the first hostelry, and be on the move next day before the dawn.

The mist thickened, and it seemed an interminable time before he found a halting-place. The patch of road appeared to be uninhabited,

without the shabbiest beerhouse to cheer it. Alastair's patience was wearing very thin, and his appetite had waxed to hunger, before the sound of hooves and the speech of men told him that he was not left solitary on the globe. A tiny twinkle of light shone ahead, rayed by the falling rain, and, shrouded and deadened by the fog, came human voices.

He appeared to be at a cross-roads, where the lane he had been following intersected a more considerable highway, for he blundered against a tall signpost. Then, steering for the light, he all but collided with a traveller on horseback, who was engaged in talk with some one on foot. The horseman was on the point of starting, and the light, which was a lantern in the hand of the man on foot, gave Alastair a faint hurried impression of a tall young man muffled in a fawn-coloured riding-coat, with a sharp nose and a harsh drawling voice. The colloquy was interrupted by his advent, the horseman moved into the rain, and the man with the lantern swung it up in some confusion. Alastair saw what he took for an ostler—a short fellow with a comically ugly face and teeth that projected like the eaves of a house.

"Is this an inn, friend?" he asked.

The voice which replied was familiar.

"It's a kind of a public, but the yill's sma' and wersh, and there's mair mice than aits in the mangers. Still and on, it's better than outbye this nicht. Is your honour to lie here?"

The man took two steps back and pushed open

the inn door, so that a flood of light emerged, and made a half-moon on the cobbles. Now Alastair recognized the lantern-bearer.

“You are Mr. Kyd’s servant ?” he said.

“E’en so. And my maister’s in bye, waitin’ on his supper. He’ll be blithe to see ye, sir. See and I’ll tak your horse and bed him weel. Awa in wi’ ye and get warm, and I’ll bring your mails.”

Alastair pushed open the first door he saw and found a room smoky with a new-lit fire, and by a table, which had been spread with the rudiments of a meal, the massive figure of Mr. Nicholas Kyd.

Mr. Kyd’s first look was one of suspicion and his second of resentment ; then, as the sun clears away storm clouds, benevolence and good fellowship beamed from his face.

“God, but I’m in luck the day. Here’s an old friend arrived in time to share my supper. Come in by the fire, sir, and no a word till you’re warmed and fed. You behold me labouring to make up for the defeeciencies of this hostler wife with some contrivances of my own. An old campaigner like Nicol Kyd doesna travel the roads without sundry small delicacies in his saddle-bags, for in some of these English hedge-inns a merciful man wouldna kennel his dog.”

He was enjoying himself hugely. A gallon measure full of ale was before him, and this he was assiduously doctoring with various packets taken from a travelling-case that stood on a chair. “Small and sour,” he muttered as he tasted it with a ladle. “But here’s a pinch of soda to

correct its acidity, and a nieve-full of powdered ginger-root to prevent colic. Drunk hot with a toast and that yill will no ken itself."

He poured the stuff into a mulling pot, and turned his attention to the edibles. "Here's a wersh cheese," he cried, "but a spice of anchovy will give it kitchen. I never travel without these tasty wee fishes, Captain Maclean. I've set the wife to make kail, for she had no meat in the house but a shank-end of beef. But I've the better part of a ham here, and a string of pig's sausages, which I take it is the English equivalent of a haggis. Faith, you and me will no fare that ill. Sit you down, sir, if your legs are dry, for I hear the kail coming. There's no wine in the place, but I'll contrive a brew of punch to make up for it."

The hostess, her round face afire from her labours in the kitchen, flung open the door, and a slatternly wench brought in a steaming tureen of broth. More candles were lit, logs laid on the fire, and the mean room took on an air of rough comfort. After the sombre afternoon Alastair surrendered himself gladly to his good fortune, and filled a tankard of the doctored ale, which he found very palatable. The soup warmed his blood and, having eaten nothing since morning, he showed himself a good trencherman. Mr. Kyd in the intervals of satisfying his own appetite beamed upon his companion, hospitably happy at being able to provide such entertainment.

"It's a thing I love," he said, "to pass a night

in an inn with a friend and a bottle. Coming out of the darkness to a warm fire and a good meal fair ravishes my heart, and the more if it's unexpected. That's your case at this moment, Captain Maclean, and you may thank the Almighty that you're not supping off fat bacon and stinking beer. A lucky meeting for you. Now I wonder at what hostel *Menelaus* and *Alcinous* could have foregathered. Maybe, the pair of them went to visit Ulysses in Ithaca and shoot his pairtricks. But it's no likely."

"How did *Menelaus* prosper at Badminton?" Alastair asked.

"Wheesht, man! We'll get in the condiments for the punch and steek the door before we talk."

The landlady brought coarse sugar in a canister and half a dozen lemons, and placed a bubbling kettle on the hob. Mr. Kyd carefully closed the door behind her and turned the key. With immense care and a gusto which now and then revealed itself in a verse of song, he poured the sugar into a great blue bowl, squeezed the lemons over it with his strong fingers, and added boiling water, with the quantities of each most nicely calculated. Then from a silver-mounted case-bottle he poured the approved modicum of whisky ("the real thing, Captain Maclean, that you'll no find south of the Highland line") and sniffed affectionately at the fragrant steam. He tasted the brew, gave it his benediction, and filled Alastair's rummer. Then he lit one of the churchwardens which the landlady had supplied, stretched

his legs to the blaze, and heaved a prodigious sigh.

"If I shut my eyes I could believe I was at Greyhouses. That's my but-and-ben in the Lammermuirs, sir. It's a queer thing, but I can never stir from home without the sorest kind of homesickness. I was never meant for this gangrel job. . . . But if I open that window it will no be a burn in the howe and the peesweeps that I'll hear, but just the weariful sougning of English trees. . . . There's a lot of the bairn in me, Captain Maclean."

The pleasant apathy induced by food and warmth was passing from Alastair's mind, and he felt anew the restlessness which the Spaniard's news had kindled. He was not in a mood for Mr. Kyd's sentiment.

"You will soon enough be in the North, I take it," he said.

"Not till the New Year, for my sins. I'm the Duke's doer, and I must be back at Amesbury to see to the plantings."

"And the mission of *Menelaus*?"

"Over for a time. My report went north a week syne by a sure hand."

"Successful?"

Mr. Kyd pursed his lips. "So-so." He looked sharply towards door and window. "Beaufort is with us—on conditions. And you?"

"I am inclined to be cheerful. We shall not lack the English grandees, provided we in the North play the game right."

“Ay. That’s gospel. You mean a victory in England.”

Alastair nodded. “Therefore *Alcinous* has done with Phaeacia and returns to the Prince as fast as horse will carry him. But what does *Menelaus* in these parts? You are far away from Badminton and farther from Amesbury.”

“I had a kind of bye-errand up this way. Now I’m on my road south again.”

“Has the Cause friends hereabouts? I saw a horseman at the door in talk with your servant.”

Mr. Kyd looked up quickly. “I heard tell of none. What was he like?”

“I saw only a face in the mist—a high collar and a very sharp nose.”

The other shook his head. “It beats me, unless it was some forwandered traveller that speired the road from Edom. I’ve seen no kenneed face for a week, except”—and he broke into a loud guffaw—“except yon daft dominie we met at Cornbury—the man that wanted us all to mount and chase a runaway lassie. I passed him on the road yestereen mounted like a cadger and groaning like an auld wife.”

Mr. Kyd’s scornful reference to the tutor of Chastlecote slightly weakened in Alastair the friendliness which his geniality had inspired.

“It will be well for us if we are as eager in our duties as that poor creature,” he said dryly. “I must be off early to-morrow and not spare horse-flesh till I see the Standard.”

“Ay, you maun lose no time. See, and I’ll

make you a list of post-houses, where you can command decent cattle. It is the fruit of an uncommon ripe experience. Keep well to the east, for there's poor roads and worse beasts this side of the Peak."

"That was the road I came, but now I must take a different airt. I had news to-day—disquieting news. The Prince is over the Border."

Mr. Kyd was on his feet, his chair scraping hard on the stone floor, and the glasses rattling on the shaken table.

"I've heard nothing of it. Man, what kind of news reaches you and not me?"

"It is true all the same. I had it from one who came long ago to Morvern and knows my clan. This day His Highness crossed Liddel."

"Liddel!" Mr. Kyd almost screamed. "Then he goes by Carlisle. But Wade's at Newcastle."

"That is precisely the damnable folly of it. He is forgoing his chance of an immediate victory over a dotard—and a victory in England. God, sir, His Highness has been ill advised. You see now why I ride north hell-for-leather. I am a soldier of some experience and few of the Prince's advisers have seen a campaign. My presence may prevent a more fatal error."

Mr. Kyd's face was a strange study. Officially it was drawn into lines of tragic melancholy, but there seemed to be satisfaction, even jubilation, behind the despair, and the voice could not escape a tremor of pleased excitement. Alastair, whose life at the French court had made him quick to

judge the *nuances* of feeling, noted this apparent contradiction, and set it down to the eagerness of loyalty which hears at last that the Rubicon is crossed.

"They will march through Lancashire," said Mr. Kyd, "and look to recruit the gentry. If so, they're a sturdier breed up yonder than on the Welsh Marches—" He hesitated. "I wonder if you're right in posting off to the North? Does this news not make a differ? What about Cornbury and Sir Watkin? Will the casting of the die not make up their minds for them? Faith, I think I'll take another look in at Badminton."

Alastair saw in the other's face only an earnest friendliness.

"No, no," he cried. "Nothing avails but the English victory. We must make certain of that. But do you, Mr. Kyd, press the grandees of the Marches, while I prevent fools and schoolboys from over-riding the natural good sense of our Prince."

Mr. Kyd had recovered his composure, and insisted on filling the rummer again for a toast to fortune. The lines about his eyes were grave, but jollity lurked in the corners of his mouth.

"Then you'll take the west side of England and make for Warrington? Ay, that's your quickest road. I'll draw you an *itinerarium*, for I whiles travel that gait." He scribbled a list on a leaf from a pocket-book and flung it to Alastair. "The morn's night you lie at Flambury, and the third night you'll be in Chester."

“Flambury,” Alastair exclaimed. “That takes me too far eastward.”

“No, no. In this country the straight road’s apt to be the long road. There’s good going to Flambury, and the turnpike on to Whitchurch. You’ll lie there at the Dog and Gun, and if you speak my name to the landlord you’ll get the best in his house. . . . Man, I envy you, for you’ll be among our own folk in a week. My heart goes with you, and here’s to a quick journey.”

Alastair was staring into the fire, and turned more suddenly than the other anticipated. Mr. Kyd’s face was in an instant all rosy goodwill, but for just that one second he was taken by surprise, and something furtive and haggard looked from his eyes. This something Alastair caught, and, as he snuggled between the inn blankets, the memory of it faintly clouded his thoughts, like a breath on a mirror.

CHAPTER V

CHANCE-MEDLEY

IN his dreams Alastair was persistently conscious of Mr. Kyd's face, which hung like a great sun in that dim landscape. Fresh-coloured and smiling at one moment, it would change suddenly to a thing peaked and hunted, with aversion and fear looking out of narrow eyes. And it mixed itself oddly with another face, a pale face framed in a high coat collar, and adorned with a very sharp nose. It may have been the supper or it may have been the exceeding hardness of the bed, but his sleep was troubled, and he woke with that sense of having toiled furiously which is the consequence of nightmare. He had forgotten the details of his dreams, but one legacy remained from them—a picture of that sharp-nosed face, and the memory of Mr. Kyd's open countenance as he had surprised it for one second the night before. As he dressed the recollection paled, and presently he laughed at it, for the Mr. Kyd who now presented himself to his memory was so honest and generous and steadfast that the other picture seemed too grotesque even for a caricature.

On descending to breakfast he found, though the day was yet early, that his companion had been up and gone a good hour before. Had he left a message? The landlady said no. What road had he taken? The answer was a reference to a dozen unknown place names, for countryfolk identify a road by the nearest villages it serves. Mr. Kyd's energy roused his emulation. He breakfasted hastily, and twenty minutes later was in the saddle.

The mist had cleared, and a still November morn opened mild and grey over a flat landscape. The road ran through acres of unkempt woodlands where spindlewood and briars glowed above russet bracken, and then over long ridges of lea and fallow, where glimpses were to be had of many miles of smoky-brown forest, with now and then a slender wedge of church steeple cutting the low soft skies. Alastair hoped to get a fresh horse at Flambury which would carry him to Chester, and as his present beast had come far, he could not press it for all his impatience. So as he jogged through the morning his thoughts had leisure to wander, and to his surprise he found his mind enjoying an unexpected peace. He was very near the brink of the torrent; let him make the most of these last yards of solid land. The stormy October had hastened the coming of winter, and the autumn scents had in most places yielded to the strong clean fragrance of a bare world. It was the smell he loved, whether he met it in Morvern among the December mosses, or on the downs

of Picardy, or in English fields. At other times one smelled herbage and flowers and trees; in winter one savoured the essential elements of water and earth.

In this mood of content he came after midday to a large village on the borders of Stafford and Shropshire, where he halted for a crust and a jug of ale. The place was so crowded that he judged it was market day, and the one inn had a press about its door like the visiting hours at a debtors' prison. He despaired of forcing an entrance, so commissioned an obliging loafer to fetch him a tankard, while he dismounted, hitched his bridle to the signpost, and seated himself at the end of a bench which ran along the inn's frontage.

The ale was long in coming, and Alastair had leisure to observe his neighbours. They were a remarkable crowd. Not villagers clearly, for the orthodox inhabitants might be observed going about their avocations, with many curious glances at the strangers. They were all sizes and shapes, and in every variety of dress from fustian to camlet, but all were youngish and sturdily built, and most a trifle dilapidated. The four men who sat on the bench beside him seemed like game-keepers out of employ, and were obviously a little drunk. In the throng at the door there were horse-boys and labourers and better-clad hobble-dehoys who might have been the sons of yeomen. A raffish young gentleman with a greyhound and with a cock of his hat broken was engaged in an altercation with an elderly fellow who had a sheaf

of papers and had mounted a pair of horn spectacles to read them. Through the open window of the tap-room floated scraps of argument in many dialects.

Alastair rubbed his eyes. Something in the sight was familiar. He had seen it in Morvern, in the Isles, in a dozen parts of France and Spain, when country fellows were recruited for foreign armies. But such things could not be in England, where the foreign recruiter was forbidden. Nor could it be enlistment for the English regiments, for where were the bright uniforms and the tuck of drums? The elderly man with the papers was beyond doubt a soldier, but he had the dress of an attorney's clerk. There was some queer business afoot here, and Alastair set himself to probe it.

His neighbour on the bench did not understand his question. But the raffish young man with the greyhound heard it, and turned sharply to the speaker. A glance at Alastair made his voice civil.

"Matter!" he exclaimed. "The matter, sir, is that I and some two-score honest men have been grossly deceived. We are of Oglethorpe's, enlisted to fight the Spaniard in the Americas. And now there is word that we are to be drafted to General Wade, as if we were not gentleman-venturers but so many ham-handed common soldiers. Hark, sir!"

From within the inn came a clatter of falling dishes and high voices.

"That will be Black Benjamin warming to work," said the young man, proffering a pewter snuff-box in which there remained a few grains of rappee. "He is striving in there with the Quartermaster-Sergeant while I seek to convince Methody Sam here of the deceitfulness of his ways."

The elderly man, referred to as Methody Sam, put his spectacles in his pocket, and revealed a mahogany face lit by two bloodshot blue eyes. At the sight of Alastair he held himself at attention, for some instinct in him discerned the soldier.

"I ain't denyin' it's a melancholy business, sir," he said, "and vexatious to them poor fellows. They was recruited by Gen'ral Oglethorpe under special permission from His Majesty, God bless 'im, for the dooty of keeping the Spaniards out of His Majesty's territory of Georgia in Ameriky, for which purpose they 'as signed on for two years, journeys there and back included, at the pay of one shilling per lawful day, and all vittles and clothing provided 'andsome. But now 'Is Majesty thinks better on it, and is minded to let Georgia slip and send them lads to General Wade to fight the Scotch. It's a 'ard pill to swallow, I ain't denyin' it, but orders is orders, and I 'ave them express this morning from Gen'ral Oglethorpe, who is a-breakin' the news to the Shropshire companies."

One of the drunkards on the bench broke into a flood of oaths which caused Methody Sam to box his ears. "Ye was enlisted for a pious and

honourable dooty, and though that dooty may be changed the terms of enlistment is the same. No foul mouth is permitted 'ere, my lad."

The young gentleman with the greyhound was listening eagerly to what was going on indoors. "Benjamin's getting his dander up," he observed. "Soon there will be bloody combs going. Hi! Benjy!" he shouted. "Come out and let's do the job fair and foursquare in the open. It's a high and holy mutiny."

There was no answer, but presently the throng at the door began to fan outward under pressure from within. A crowd of rough fellows tumbled out, and at their tail a gypsy-looking youth with a green bandana round his head, dragging a small man, who had the air of having once been in authority. Alastair recognized the second of the two non-commissioned officers, but while one had protested against oaths the other was filling the air with a lurid assortment. This other had his hands tied with a kerchief, and a cord fastening the joined palms to his knees, so that he presented a ridiculous appearance of a man at his prayers.

"Why hain't ye trussed up Methody?" the gypsy shouted to the owner of the greyhound.

The sergeant cast an appealing eye on Alastair. There seemed to be no arms in the crowd, except a cudgel or two and the gypsy's whinger. It was an appeal which the young man's tradition could not refuse.

"Have patience, gentlemen," he cried. "I cannot have you prejudging the case. Forward

with your prisoner, but first untie these bonds. Quick."

The gypsy opened his mouth in an insolent refusal, when he saw something in the horseman's eye which changed his mind. Also he noted his pistols, and his light travelling sword.

"That's maybe fair," he grunted, and with his knife slit his prisoner's bonds.

"Now, out with your grievances."

The gypsy could talk, and a very damning indictment he made of it. "We was 'listed for overseas, with good chance of prize-money, and a nobleman's freedom. And now we're bidden stop at home as if we was lousy lobsters that took the King's money to trick the gallows. Is that fair and English, my sweet pretty gentleman? We're to march to-morrow against the naked Highlanders that cut out a man's bowels with scythes, and feed their dogs with his meat. Is that the kind of fighting you was dreaming of, my precious boys? No, says you, and we'll be damned, says you, if we'll be diddled. Back we goes to our pretty homes, but with a luckpenny in our pocket for our wasted time and our sad disappointment. Them sergeants has the money, and we'll hold them upside down by the heels till we shake it out of them."

Methody Sam replied, looking at Alastair. "It's crool 'ard, but orders is orders. Them folks enlisted to do the King's commands, and if 'Is Majesty 'appens to change 'is mind, it's no business o' theirs or mine. The money me and Bill 'as is

Government money, and if they force it from us they'll be apprehended and 'anged as common robbers. I want to save their poor innocent souls from 'anging felony."

The crowd showed no desire for salvation. There was a surge towards the two men and the gypsy's hand would have been on the throat of Methody Sam had not Alastair struck it up. The smaller of the two non-commissioned officers was chafing his wrists, which his recent bonds had abraded, and lamenting that he had left his pistols at home.

"What made you come here with money and nothing to guard it?" Alastair asked.

"The General's orders, sir. But it was different when we was temptin' them with Ameriky and the Spaniards' gold. Now we'll need a file o' loaded muskets to get 'em a step on the road. Ay, sir, we'll be fort'nate if by supper time they've not all scattered like a wisp o' snipes, takin' with 'em 'Is Majesty's guineas."

"Keep beside me!" Alastair whispered. A sudden rush would have swept the little man off, had not Methody Sam plucked him back.

"Better yield quiet," said the gypsy. "We don't want no blood-lettin', but we're boys as is not to be played with. Out with the guineas, tear up the rolls, and the two of ye may go to Hell for all we care."

"What are you going to do?" Alastair asked his neighbours.

The little man looked bleakly at the crowd.

"There don't seem much of a chance, but we're bound to put up a fight, seein' we're in charge of 'Is Majesty's property. That your notion, Sam?"

The Methody signified his assent by a cheerful groan.

"Then I'm with you," said Alastair. "To the inn wall! We must get our backs protected."

The suddenness of the movement and the glint of Alastair's sword opened a way for the three to a re-entrant angle of the inn, where their flanks and rear were safe from attack. Alastair raised his voice.

"Gentlemen," he said, "as a soldier I cannot permit mutiny. You will not touch a penny of His Majesty's money, and you will wait here on General Oglethorpe's orders. If he sees fit to disband you, good and well; if not, you march as he commands."

Even as he spoke inward laughter consumed him. He, a follower of the Prince, was taking pains that certain troops should reach Wade, the Prince's enemy. Yet he could not act otherwise, for the camaraderie of his profession constrained him.

The power of the armed over the unarmed was in that moment notably exemplified. There was grumbling, a curse or two, and sullen faces, but no attempt was made to rush that corner where stood an active young man with an ugly sword. The mob swayed and muttered, the gypsy went off on an errand behind the inn, one of the drunkards lurched forward as if to attack and

fell prone. A stone or two was thrown, but Alastair showed his pistols, and that form of assault was dropped. The crowd became stagnant, but it did not disperse.

"I must get on to Flambury," Alastair told his neighbours. "I cannot wait all day here. There is nothing for it but that you go with me. My pistols will get us a passage to my horse yonder, and we can ride and tie."

The plan was never put into action. For at the moment from a window over their heads descended a shower of red-hot embers. All three leaped forward to avoid a scorching and so moved outside the protecting side wall. Then, neatly and suddenly, the little man called Bill was plucked up and hustled into the crowd. Alastair could not fire or draw upon a circle of gaping faces. He looked furiously to his right, when a cry on his left warned him that the Methody also had gone.

But him he could follow, for he saw the boots of him being dragged inside the inn door. Clearing his way with his sword, he rushed thither, stumbling over the greyhound and sending it flying. There were three steps to the door, and as he mounted them he obtained a view over the heads of the mob and down the village street. He saw his horse still peacefully tethered to the signpost, and beyond it there came into view a mounted troop clattering up the cobbles.

The door yielded to his foot and he received in his arms the Methody, who seemed to have made

his escape from his captors. "They've got Bill in the cellar," he gasped. "It's that Gypsy Ben." And then he was stricken dumb at something which he saw below Alastair's armpits.

The crowd had scattered and its soberer members now clustered in small knots with a desperate effort at nonchalance. Opposite the inn door horsemen had halted, and the leader, a tall man with the black military cockade in his hat, was looking sternly at the group, till his eye caught the Methody. "Ha! Sewell," he cried, and the Methody, stricken into a ramrod, stood erect before him.

"These are recruits of ours?" he asked. "You have explained to them the new orders?"

"Sir," said the ramrod, raising his voice so that all could hear, "I have explained, as in dooty bound, and I 'ave to report that, though naturally disappointed, they bows to orders, all but a gypsy rapscallion, of whom we be well quit. I 'ave likewise to report that Bill and me 'as been much assisted by this gentleman you sees before you, without whom things might 'ave gone ugly."

The tall soldier's eyes turned towards Alastair and he bowed.

"I am in your debt, sir. General Oglethorpe is much beholden to you."

"Nay, sir, as a soldier who chanced upon a difficult situation I had no choice but to lend my poor aid."

The General proffered his snuff-box. "Of which regiment?"

"Of none English. My service has been outside my country, on the continent of Europe. I am born a poor Scottish gentleman, sir, whose sword is his livelihood. They call me Maclean."

General Oglethorpe looked up quickly. "A most honourable livelihood. I too have carried my sword abroad—to the Americas, as you may have heard. I was returning thither, but I have been intercepted for service in the North. Will you dine with me, sir? I should esteem your company."

"Nay, I must be on the road," said Alastair. "Already I have delayed too long. I admire your raw material, sir, but I do not covet your task of shaping it to the purposes of war."

The General smiled sourly. "In Georgia they would have been good soldiers in a fortnight. Here in England they will be still raw after a year's campaigning."

They parted with elaborate courtesies, and looking back, Alastair saw what had five minutes before been an angry mob falling into rank under General Oglethorpe's eye. He wondered what had become of Ben the Gypsy.

Flambury proved but a short two-hours' journey. It was a large village with a broad street studded with ancient elm trees, and, as Alastair entered it, that street was thronged like a hiring fair. The noise of human voices, of fiddles and tabrets and of excited dogs, had greeted him half a mile off, like the rumour of a battlefield. Wondering at the cause of the din, he wondered more when he

approached the houses and saw the transformation of the place. There were booths below the elm trees, protected from possible rain by awnings of sacking, where ribands and crockery and cheap knives were being vended. Men and women, clothed like mummers, danced under the November sky as if it had been May-day. Games of chance were in progress, fortunes were being spae'd, fairings of gingerbread bought, and, not least, horses sold to the accompaniment of shrill cries from stable boys and the whinnys of startled colts and fillies. The sight gave Alastair a sense of security, for in such an assemblage a stranger would not be questioned. He asked a woman what the stir signified. "Lawk a mussy, where be you borned," she said, "not to know 'tis Flam-bury Feast-Day?"

The Dog and Gun was easy to find. Already the darkness was falling, and while the street was lit with tarry staves, the interior of the hostelry glowed with a hundred candles. The sign was undecipherable in the half light, but the name in irregular letters was inscribed above the ancient door. Alastair rode into a courtyard filled with chaises and farmers' carts, and having with some difficulty found an ostler, stood over him while his horse was groomed, fed, and watered. Then he turned to the house, remembering Mr. Kyd's recommendation to the landlord. If that recommendation could procure him some privacy in this visit, fortunate would have been his meeting with the laird of Greyhouses.

The landlord, discovered not without difficulty, was a lusty florid fellow, with a loud voice and a beery eye. He summoned the traveller into his own parlour, behind the tap-room, from which all day his bustling wife directed the affairs of the house. The place was a shrine of comfort, with a bright fire reflected in polished brass and in bottles of cordials and essences which shone like jewels. The wife at a long table was mixing bowl after bowl of spiced liquors, her face glowing like a moon, and her nose perpetually wrinkled in the task of sniffing odours to detect the moment when the brew was right. The husband placed a red-cushioned chair for Alastair, and played nervously with the strings of his apron. It occurred to the traveller that the man had greeted him as if he had been expected, and at this he wondered.

The name of Mr. Kyd was a talisman that wrought mightily upon the host's goodwill, but that goodwill was greater than his powers.

"Another time and the whole house would have been at your honour's service," he protested. "But to-day—" and he shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, you shall have a bed, though I have to lie myself on bare boards, but a private room is out of my power. We've but the three of them, and they're all as throng as a bee-hive. There's Tom Briggs in the Blue Room, celebrating the sale of his string of young horses—an ancient engagement, sir; and there's the Codgers' Supper in the Gents' Attic, and in Shrewsbury there's five

pig dealers sleeping on chairs. That's so, mother ? ”

“ Six in Shrewsbury,” said the lady, “ and there's five waiting on the Attic, as soon as the Codgers have supped.”

“ You see, sir, how I'm situated. You'll have a good bed to yourself, but I fear I must ask you to sup in the bar parlour with the other gentry that's here to-day. Unless your honour would prefer the kitchen ? ” he added hopefully.

Alastair, who had a vision of a company of drunken squirlings of an inquisitive turn, announced that he would greatly prefer the kitchen. The decision seemed to please the landlord.

“ There's a good fire and not above half a dozen for company at present. Warm yourself there, sir, and your supper will be ready before your feet are comforted. A dish of pullets and eggs, mutton chops, a prime ham, a good cut of beef, and the best of double Gloucester. What say you to that now ? And for liquor a bowl of mother's spiced October, with a bottle of old port to go with the cheese.”

Alastair was hungry enough to approve of the lot, and tired and cold enough to welcome the chance of a roaring kitchen hearth. In the great shadowy place, the rafters loaded with hams and the walls bright with warming-pans, there was only a handful of toppers, since the business out-of-doors was still too engrossing. The landlord was as good as his word, and within half an hour the traveller was sitting down to a most sub-

stantial meal at the massive board. The hostess's spiced October was delicate yet potent, the port thereafter—of which the host had a couple of glasses—a generous vintage. The young man at length drew his chair from the table to the fire-side and stretched his legs to the blaze, replete and comfortable in body, and placid, if a little hazy, in mind. . . . Presently the leaping flames of the logs took odd shapes ; the drone of voices from the corner became surf on a shore : he saw a fire on a beach and dark hills behind it, and heard the soft Gaelic of his kin. . . . His head nodded on his breast and he was sound asleep.

He woke to find an unpleasant warmth below his nose and to hear a cackle as of a thousand geese in his ears. Something bright and burning was close to his face. He shrank from it and at once sprawled on his back, his head bumping hard on the stone floor.

The shock thoroughly awakened him. As he sprang to his feet he saw a knot of flushed giggling faces. One of the group had been holding a red-hot poker to his face, while another had drawn away the chair from beneath him.

His first impulse was to buffet their heads, for no man is angrier than a sleeper rudely awakened. The kitchen was now crowded, and the company seemed to appreciate the efforts of the practical jokers, for there was a roar of applause and shouts of merriment. The jokers, who from their dress were hobbledehoy yeomen or small squires, were thus encouraged to continue, and, being apparently

well on the way to drunkenness, were not disposed to consider risks. Two of them wore swords, but it was clear that the sword was not their weapon.

Alastair in a flaming passion had his hand on his blade, when his arm was touched from behind and a voice spoke. "Control your temper, sir, I beseech you. This business is premeditated. They seek to fasten a quarrel on you. Don't look round. Smile and laugh with them."

The voice was familiar though he could not put a name to it. A second glance at the company convinced him that the advice was sound and he forced himself to urbanity. He took his hand from his sword, rubbed his eyes like one newly awakened, and mustered a parody of a smile.

"I have been asleep," he stammered. "Forgive my inattention, gentlemen. You were saying . . . Ha ha! I see! A devilish good joke, sir. I dreamed I was a blacksmith and woke to believe I had fallen in the fire."

The hobbledehoyes were sober enough to be a little nonplussed at this reception of their pleasantry. They stood staring sheepishly, all but one who wore a mask and a nightcap, as if he had just come from a mumming show. To judge by his voice he seemed older than the rest.

"Tell us your dreams," he said rudely. "From your talk in your sleep they should have been full of treason. Who may you be, sir?"

Alastair, at sight of a drawer's face round the corner of the tap-room door, called for a bowl of punch.

“Who am I?” he said quietly. “A traveller who has acquired a noble thirst, which he would fain share with other good fellows.”

“Your name, my thirsty friend?”

“Why, they call me Watson—Andrew Watson, and my business is to serve his Grace of Queensberry, that most patriotic nobleman.” He spoke from a sudden fancy, rather than from any purpose; it was not likely that he could be controverted, for Mr. Kyd was now posting into Wiltshire.

His questioner looked puzzled, but it was obvious that the name of a duke, and Queensberry at that, had made an impression upon the company. The man spoke aside with a friend, and then left the kitchen. This was so clear a proof that there had been purpose in his baiting that Alastair could have found it in him to laugh at such clumsy conspirators. Somehow word had been sent of his coming, and there had been orders to entangle him; but the word had not been clear and his ill-wishers were still in doubt about his identity. It was his business in no way to enlighten them, but he would have given much to discover the informant.

He had forgotten about the mentor at his elbow. Turning suddenly, he was confronted with the queer figure of the tutor of Chastlecote, who was finishing a modest supper of bread and cheese at the main table. The man's clothes were shabbier than ever, but his face and figure were more wholesome than at Cornbury. His cheeks had a faint weathering, his neck was less flaccid,

and he held himself more squarely. As Alastair turned, he also swung round, his left hand playing a tattoo upon his knee. His eye was charged with confidences.

"We meet again," he whispered. "Ever since we parted I have had a premonition of this encounter. I have much for your private ear."

But it was not told, for the leader of the hobble-dehoys, the fellow with the mask and nightcap, was again in the kitchen. It looked as if he had been given instructions by some one, for he shouted, as a man does when he is uncertain of himself and would keep up his courage.

"Gentlefolk all, there are vipers among us to-night. This man who calls himself a duke's agent, and the hedge schoolmaster at his elbow. They are naught but lousy Jacobites, and 'tis our business as good Englishmen to strip and search them."

The others of his party cried out in assent, and there was a measure of support from the company at large. But before a man could stir the tutor spoke.

"Bad law!" he said. "I and, for all I know, the other gentleman are inoffensive travellers moving on our lawful business. You cannot lay hand on us without a warrant from a justice. But, sirs, I am not one to quibble about legality. This fellow has insulted me grossly and shall here and now be brought to repentance. Put up your hands, you rogue."

The tutor had suddenly become a fearsome

figure. He had risen from his chair, struggled out of his coat, and, blowing like a bull, was advancing across the floor on his adversary, his great doubled fists held up close to his eyes. The other gave ground.

"I do not fight with scum," he growled. But as the tutor pressed on him, his hand went to his sword.

He was not permitted to draw it. "You will fight with the natural weapon of Englishmen," his assailant cried, and caught the sword strap and broke it, so that the weapon clattered into a corner and its wearer spun round like a top. The big man seemed to have the strength of a bull. "Put up your hands," he cried again, "or take a coward's drubbing."

The company was now in high excitement, and its sympathies were mainly against the challenged. Seeing this, he made a virtue of necessity, doubled his fists, ducked and got in a blow on the tutor's brisket. The latter had no skill, but immense reach and strength and the uttermost resolution. He simply beat down the other's guard, reckless of the blows he received, and presently dealt him such a clout that he measured his length on the floor, whence he rose sick and limping and departed on the arm of a friend. The victor, his cheeks mottled red and grey and his breath whistling like the wind in a chimney, returned amid acclamation to the fireside, where he accepted a glass of Alastair's punch.

For a moment the haggardness was wiped from

the man's face, and it shone with complacence. His eyes shot jovial but martial glances at the company.

"We have proved our innocence," he whispered to Alastair. "Had you used sword or pistol you would have been deemed spy and foreigner, but a bout of fisticuffs is the warrant of the true-born Englishman."

CHAPTER VI

INTRODUCES THE RUNAWAY LADY

ALASTAIR stole a glance at his neighbour's face and found it changed from their first meeting. It had lost its dumb misery and—for the moment—its grey pallor. Now it was flushed, ardent, curiously formidable, and, joined with the heavy broad shoulders, gave an impression of truculent strength.

"I love to bandy such civilities," said the combatant. "I was taught to use my hands by my uncle Andrew, who used to keep the ring at Smith-fields. We praise the arts of peace, but the keenest pleasure of mankind is in battles. You, sir, follow the profession of arms. Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier."

He helped himself to the remainder of the bowl of punch, which he gulped down noisily. Alastair was in two minds about his new acquaintance. The man's simplicity and courage and honest friendliness went to his heart, but he was at a loss in which rank of society to place him. Mr. Johnson spoke with a queer provincial accent—to him friend was "freend" and a shire a "sheer"—and his manners were those of a yokel, save

that they seemed to spring from a natural singularity rather than from a narrow experience, for at moments he had a fine dignity, and his diction was metropolitan if his pronunciation was rustic. The more the young man looked at the weak heavy-lidded eyes and the massive face, the more he fell under their spell. The appearance was like a Moorish palace—outside, a bleak wall which had yet a promise of a treasure-house within.

“What of your errand?” he asked. “When we last parted you were in quest of a runaway lady.”

“My quest has prospered, though I have foundered a good horse over it, and when I have paid for this night’s lodging, shall have only a quarter-guinea to take me back to Chastlecote. Why, sir, since you are kind enough to interest yourself in this affair, you shall be told of it. Miss Grevel is duly and lawfully wed and is now my lady Norreys. Sir John has gone north on what he considers to be his duty. He is, as you are aware, a partisan of the young Prince. My lady stays behind; indeed she is lodged not a mile from this inn in the house of her mother’s brother, Mr. Thicknesse.”

“Then you are easier in mind about the business?”

“I am easier in mind. The marriage was performed as decently as was possible for a thing so hastily contrived. He has behaved to the lady in all respects with courtesy and consideration, and he has shown the strength of his principles by departing at once to the camp of his

Prince. I am disposed to think better of his character than I had been encouraged to by rumour. And, sir, there is one thing that admits of no shadow of doubt. The lady is most deeply in love."

"You have seen her?"

"This very day. She carries her head as if she wore a crown on it, and her eyes are as happy as a child's. I did not venture to present myself, for if she guessed that I had followed her she would have laid a whip over my back." He stopped to laugh, with affection in his eyes. "She has done it before, sir, for 'tis a high-spirited lady. So I bribed a keeper with sixpence to allow me to watch from a covert, as she took her midday walk. She moved like Flora, and she sang as she moved. That is happiness, said I to myself, and whatever the faults of the man who is its cause, 'twould be sacrilege to mar it. So I slipped off, thanking my Maker that out of seeming ill the dear child had won this blessedness."

Mr. Johnson ceased to drum on the table or waggle his foot, and fell into an abstraction, his body at peace, his eyes fixed on the fire in a pleasant dream. The company in the kitchen had thinned to half a dozen, and out-of-doors the din of the fair seemed to be dying down. Alastair was growing drowsy, and he too fell to staring at the flames and seeing pictures in their depths. Suddenly a hand was laid on his elbow and, turning with a start, he found a lean little man on the form behind him.

"Be 'ee the Dook's man?" a cracked voice whispered.

Alastair puzzled, till he remembered that an hour back he had claimed to be Queensberry's agent. So he nodded.

The little man thrust a packet into his hands.

"This be for 'ee," he said, and was departing, when Alastair plucked his arm.

"From whom?" he asked.

"I worn't to say, but 'ee knows." Then he thrust forward a toothless mouth to the other's ear. "From Brother Gilly," he whispered.

"And to whom were you sent?"

"To 'ee. To the Dook's man at the Dog and Gun. I wor to ask at the landlord, but 'e ain't forthcoming, and one I knows and trusts points me to 'ee."

Alastair realized that he was mistaken for Mr. Nicholas Kyd, now posting south; and, since the two were on the same business, he felt justified in acting as Mr. Kyd's deputy. He pocketed the package and gave the messenger a shilling. At that moment Mr. Johnson came out of his reverie. His brow was clouded.

"At my lord Cornbury's house there was a tall man with a florid face. He treated me with little politeness and laughed out of season. He had a servant, too, a rough Scot who attended to my horse. I have seen that servant in these parts."

Alastair woke to a lively interest. Then he remembered that Mr. Kyd had told him of a

glimpse he had had of the tutor of Chastlecote. Johnson had seen the man Edom before he had started south.

His thoughts turned to the packet. There could be no chance of overtaking Mr. Kyd, whose correspondent was so culpably in arrears. The thing might be the common business of the Queensberry estates, in which case it would be forwarded when he found an occasion. But on the other hand it might be business of *Menelaus*, business of urgent import to which Alastair could attend. . . . He debated the matter with himself for a little, and then broke the seal.

The packet had several enclosures. One was in a cypher to which he had not the key. Another was a long list of names, much contracted, with figures in three columns set against each. The third riveted his eyes, so that he had no ear for the noises of the inn or the occasional remarks of his companion.

It was a statement, signed by the word *Tekel* and endorsed with the name of *Mene*—a statement of forces guaranteed from Wales and the Welsh Marches. There could be no doubt about its purport. There was Sir Watkin's levy and the day and the hour it would be ready to march; that was a test case which proved the document authentic, for Alastair himself had discussed provisionally these very details a week ago at Wynn-stay. There were other levies in money and men against the names of Cotton, Herbert, Savage, Wynne, Lloyd, Powell. Some of the figures were

queried, some explicit and certified. There was a note about Beaufort, promising an exact account within two days, which would be sent to Oxford. Apparently the correspondent called Gilly, whoever he might be, knew of Kyd's journey southward, but assumed that he had not yet started. At the end were three lines of gibberish—a cypher obviously.

As his mind grasped the gist of the thing, a flush crept over his face and he felt the beat of his heart quicken. Here was news, tremendous news. The West was rising, careless of a preliminary English victory, and waiting only the arrival of the Prince at some convenient rendezvous. There were ten thousand men and half a million of money in these lists, and they were not all. Beaufort was still to come, and Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, and the Welsh southwest. The young man's eyes kindled, and then grew a little dim. He saw the triumph of his Prince, and the fulfilment of his dreams, for the war would no longer be a foreign invasion but a rising of Englishmen. He remembered Midwinter's words, "You can win only by enlisting Old England." It looked as if it had been done. . . . He saw now why Kyd must linger in the south. He was the conduit pipe of a vital intelligence which must go to the Prince by the swiftest means, for on it all his strategy depended. He himself would carry this budget, and for the others Kyd had doubtless made his own plans. Even now Lancashire would be up, and Cheshire stirring. . . .

The kitchen door was flung open with a violence which startled three toppers left by the table. A lantern wavered in the doorway, and in front of it a square-set man in fustian stumped into the place. He carried a constable's stave in one hand and in the other a paper. Behind him a crowd followed, among whom might be recognized the mummers of the evening, notably the one whose bandaged face bore witness to the strength of Mr. Samuel Johnson's fist.

The constable marched up to the hearth.

"By these 'ere presents I lays 'old on the bodies of two suspected pussons, to wit one Muck Lane, a Scotchman, and one Johnson, a schoolmaster, they being pussons whose doings and goings and comings are contrairy to the well-bein' of this 'ere realm and a danger to the peace of our Lord the King."

The mention of himself by name showed Alastair that this was no affair of village spy-hunters, but a major peril. In his hand he still held the packet addressed to Kyd. Were he searched it might be damning evidence; moreover he had already the best part of the intelligence therein contained in his head. Mr. Johnson, who was chilly, had just flung on more logs and the fire blazed high. Into the red heart of it went the papers and, since the tutor's bulky figure was between him and the door, the act was not noticed by the constable and his followers.

"What whim of rascality is this?" asked Mr. Johnson, reaching for a stout oak stick which he had propped in a corner.

"A very troublesome whim for you," said a voice. "The constable holds a warrant issued by Squire Thicknesse for the arrest of two Jacobite emissaries traced into this village."

"Ay," said the constable, "'ee'd better come quiet, for Squire 'ave sent a brave lot o' keepers and stable lads to manhandle 'ee if 'ee don't. My orders is to carry 'ee to the Manor and lock 'ee up there till such time as 'ee can be sent to Brumming'am."

"Arrant nonsense," cried Johnson. "I'm a better subject of His Majesty than any rascal among you, and so, I doubt not, is my friend. Yet so great is our veneration for the laws of England, that we will obey this preposterous summons. Take me to your Squire, but be warned, every jack of you, that if a man lays his hand on me I will fell him to the earth."

"And I say likewise," said Alastair, laying a significant hand on his sword.

The constable, who had no great stomach for his duty, was relieved by his prisoners' complaisance, and after some discussion with his friend announced that no gyves should be used if they consented to walk with the Squire's men on both sides of them. Alastair insisted on having his baggage brought with him, which was duly delivered to one of the Manor grooms by a silent landlady; Mr. Johnson carried his slender outfit in his pockets. The landlord did not show himself. But at the inn door, before the Manor men closed up, a figure pressed forward from the knot

of drunken onlookers, and Alastair found his sleeve plucked and the face of Brother Gilly's messenger beside him.

"I've been mistook, maister. 'Ee bain't the Dook's man, not the one I reckoned. Gimme back the letter."

"It's ashes now. Tell that to him that sent you. Say the letter's gone, but the news travels forward in a man's head."

The messenger blinked uncomprehendingly and then made as if to repeat his request, but a sudden rush of merrymakers, hungry for a fresh spectacle, swept him down the street. Presently the escort was clear of the village and tramping through a black aisle of trees. Some one lit a lantern, which showed the mattress of chestnut leaves underfoot and the bare branches above. The keepers and stable-boys whistled, and Mr. Johnson chanted aloud what sounded like Latin hexameters. For him there was no discomfort in the adventure save that on a raw night it removed him from a warm fireside.

But for Alastair the outlook was grave. Here was he arrested by a booby constable on the warrant of some Justice Shallow, but arrested under his own name. He had passed secretly from Scotland to Cornbury, and but for the party at the latter place and one strange fellow on Otmoor, no one had known that name. Could the news have leaked out from the Cornbury servants? But, even then, he was not among the familiar figures of Jacobitism, and he had

but just come from France. Only Lord Cornbury knew his true character, and Lord Cornbury did not talk. Yet some one with full knowledge of his past and present had tracked him to this village, a place far from any main highway to the North.

What he feared especially was delay. Unless Cornbury bore witness against him, or the man from Otmoor, the law had no evidence worth a farthing. Hearsay and suspicion could not hang him. He would play the part of the honest traveller now returning from an Oxfordshire visit, and if needs be he would refer to Queensberry's business. But hearsay and suspicion could delay. He was suddenly maddened by the thought that some bumbling Justice might detain him in these rotting midlands when the Prince was crossing Ribble. And he had to get north with the news of the Welsh recruiting! At the thought he bit his lips in a sharp vexation.

They passed through gates into a park where the trees fell back from the road, and presently were in a flagged courtyard with a crack of light showing from a door ajar. It opened and a portly butler filled it.

"You will await his honour in the Justice Room," he announced, and the prisoners swung to the right under an archway into another quadrangle.

The Justice Room proved to be a bare apartment, smelling strongly of apples, with a raised platform at one end and on the floor a number of

wooden forms arranged like the pens at a sheep fair. On the platform stood a large handsome arm-chair covered in Spanish leather, and before it a small table. The butler entered by a door giving on the platform, and on the table placed a leather-bound book and on the chair a red velvet cushion.

"Exit the clerk, enter the preacher," said Johnson.

The servant, bowing profoundly, ushered in a tall gentleman in a suit of dark-blue velvet, with a fine lace cravat falling over a waistcoat of satin and silver. The gentleman might have been fifty years of age by the lines round his mouth, but his cherubic countenance was infantine in contour, and coloured, by hunting or the bottle, to an even pink. He had clearly been dining well, for he plumped down heavily in the chair and his eye was as blue and vacant as a frosty sky. When he spoke it was with the careful enunciation of one who is not in a condition to take liberties with the English tongue.

"Makin' so bold, your honour," said the constable, "them 'ere's the prisoners as is named in your honour's worshipful warrant."

His honour nodded. "What the devil do you want me to do, Perks?" he asked.

The mummer with the broken head, who had become mysteriously one of the party, answered.

"Lock 'em up for to-night, Squire Thicknesse, and to-morrow send 'em to Birmingham with a mounted escort. It's political business, and no matter of poaching or petty thieving."

"I require that the charge be read," said Johnson.

Squire Thicknesse took up a paper, looked at it with aversion, and gazed round him helplessly. "Where the devil is my clerk?" he lamented. "Gone feasting to Flambury, I'll warrant. I cannot read this damned crabbed hand."

"Let me be your clerk, Nunkie dear."

A girl had slipped through the door, and now stood by the chair looking over the Squire's shoulder. She was clearly very young, for her lips had the pouting fullness and her figure the straight lines of a child's, and her plain white gown and narrow petticoats had a nursery simplicity. The light was bad, and Alastair could not note the details, seeing only a glory of russet hair and below it a dimness of pearl and rose. On that much he was clear, and on the bird-like charm of her voice.

The effect of the vision on Johnson was to make him drive an elbow into Alastair's ribs and to murmur in what was meant for a whisper: "That is my lady. That is the dear child."

The sharp young eyes had penetrated the gloom below the platform.

"Why, Nunkie, there is a face I know. Heavens! It is our tutor from Chastlecote. Old Puffin we called him, for he puffs like my spaniel. A faithful soul, Nunkie, but at times oppressive. What can he want so far from home?"

The mummer, who seemed to have assumed the duties of prosecution, answered:

“The man Johnson is accused of being act and part with the other in conspiracy against His Majesty’s throne.”

The girl’s laughter trilled through the place. “Oh, what delectable folly! Mr. Samuel a conspirator! He is too large and noisy, Nunkie, and far, far too much of a sobersides. But give me the paper and I will be your clerk.”

With disquiet and amazement Alastair listened to the record. His full name was set down and his rank in King Louis’ service. His journey into Oxfordshire was retailed, and its purpose, but the name of Cornbury was omitted. Then followed his expedition into Wales, with special mention of Wynnstay, and last his urgent reasons for returning north. Whoever had compiled the indictment was most intimately informed of all his doings. His head swam, for the thing seemed starkly incredible, and the sense of having lived unwittingly close to a deadly foe affected him with something not far from fear.

“What do you say to that?” Squire Thicknesse asked.

“That it is some foolish blunder. You have laid hold on the wrong man, sir, and I admit no part of it except the name, which is mine, and, with deference, as ancient and unsmirched as your honour’s. No single fact can be adduced to substantiate these charges.”

“They will be abundantly proven.” The mummer’s voice croaked ominous as a raven’s.

The charge against Johnson proved to be much

fimsier, and was derided by the girl. "I insist that you straightway discharge my Mr. Samuel," she cried. "I will go bail for his good behaviour, and to-morrow a servant shall take him back to Chastlecote. He is too innocent to be left alone. The other——"

"He says he is an agent of the Duke of Queensberry," said the relentless mummer. "I can prove him to be a liar."

The girl was apparently not listening. Her eyes had caught Alastair's and some intelligence seemed to pass from them to his. She spoke a word in the Squire's ear and then looked beyond the prisoners to the mummer.

"My uncle, who is known for his loyalty to the present Majesty, will take charge of the younger prisoner and send him safe to-morrow to Birmingham. The other he will discharge. . . . That is your will, Nunkie?"

The Squire nodded. He was feeling very sleepy and at the same time very thirsty, and his mind hovered between bed and a fresh bottle.

"You may go home now, friends," she said, "and sweet dreams to you. You, constable bring the two men to the Great Hall." Then she slipped an arm inside her uncle's. "My Mr. Sam shall sup in the buttery and have a bed from Giles. To-morrow we will find him a horse. You are a wise judge, Nunkie, and do not waste your wisdom on innocents. The other man looks dangerous and must be well guarded. Put him in the Tower garret, and give Giles the key. But

first let the poor creature have bite and sup, if he wants it. He has the air of a gentleman."

As Alastair walked before the staff of the constable, who wielded it like an ox-goad, his mind was furiously busy at guessing the source of the revelations in the warrant. Not till they stood in the glow of the hall lights did the notion of Kyd's servant come to him by the process of exhausting other possibilities. But the man had set off with Kyd early that morning for the South from a place forty miles distant. It was a naked absurdity, but nevertheless he asked Johnson the question, "Where did you see the serving man who took your horse at Cornbury?"

The answer staggered him. "This very day at the gate of this place about an hour after noon."

As his perturbed gaze roamed round the hall he caught again the eye of the girl, looking back with her foot on the staircase. This time there could be no mistake. Her face was bright with confidential friendliness.

CHAPTER VII

HOW A MAN MAY HUNT WITH THE HOUNDS
AND YET RUN WITH THE HARE

THE butler Giles conducted him through long corridors to the door which separated the manor proper from its ancient Edwardian tower, and then up stone stairways to a room under the roof which had once been the sleeping apartment of the lord of the castle. The walls were two yards thick, the windows mere slits for arrows, the oaken floor as wavy as a ploughland. He had refused supper and asked only peace to collect his wits. Giles set a candle down on an oak table, and nodded to a cavernous canopied bed. "There's blankets enow to keep you warm, since the night be mild for the time o' year. Good sleep to ye and easy dreams." The key turned in the lock, and the shuffle of heelless shoes died on the stair.

Alastair flung himself on the bed, and lay staring at the roof of the canopy, fitfully illumined by the dancing candle. A light wind must have crept into the room from some cranny of the windows, for the flame flickered and queer shadows chased each other over the dark walls. He was in a torment of disquietude since hearing the

warrant—not for his own safety, for he did not despair of giving these chaw-bacons the slip, but for the prospects of the Cause. There was black treason somewhere in its innermost councils. The man who had betrayed every danger-point in his own career could do the same thing for others. The rogue—Kyd's servant or whoever he might be—was in the way of knowing the heart of every secret. Kyd, charged with a most vital service on which the future of England hung, had this Judas always at his elbow to frustrate or falsify any message to the North, to play the devil with the Prince's recruiting, and at the end to sell his master's head for gold. The thought made the young man dig his nails into his palms. God's pity that in an affair so gossamer-fine there should be this rude treachery to rend the web. . . . But if the miscreant was Kyd's servant, how came he in this neighbourhood? Had he been dismissed Kyd's service? Or was Kyd himself at hand and the journey into Wiltshire relinquished? His mind was in utter confusion.

Nevertheless the discovery had quickened his spirit, which of late he thought had been growing languid. He was a campaigner, and made his plans quick. His immediate duty was to escape, his next to reach the Prince and concert measures to meet the case of West England. Fortunate for him that the letter of Brother Gilly had fallen into his hand, for now he knew the magnitude of the business. But first he must sleep, for all evening he had been nodding. He had the soldier's

trick of snatching odd hours of slumber, so, drawing a blanket round him and resolutely shutting off all thoughts, he was soon unconscious.

He slept lightly, and woke to see the candle, which he had left burning, guttering over the edge of the iron candlestick. A swift shadow ran across the wall before him, and a sudden waft of air caused the candle-end to flare like a torch. He glanced at the door, and it seemed to move. Then the place was quiet again, but it was brighter, for a new light had come into it. He scrambled from the bed to see the glow of a shaded lantern, and a slim cloaked figure slipping the key from the door.

The lantern was set beside the candle on the table. The figure wore a furred bed-gown and a nightcap of lace and pink satin, and its brown eyes in the shadow were bright as a squirrel's and very merry.

"La, la, such a commotion ere I could come to you, sir," she said. "Giles must carry Nunkie to bed and hoist Squire Bretherton and Sir Ambrose on their horses, and get a message from me to Black Ben, and pass a word to Stable Bill about Moonbeam. You have slept, wise man that you are? But it is time to be about your business of escaping, for in three hours it will be daylight."

She was like a pixie in the half darkness, a tall pixie, that had a delicious small stammer in its speech. Alastair was on his feet now, bowing awkwardly.

"Tell me," she whispered. "The warrant is true? You are Alastair Maclean, a captain in

Lee's Regiment of France, and a messenger from the Prince in Scotland. Oh, have no fear of me, for I am soul and body for the Cause."

"The warrant spoke truly," he said.

"And you will join the Prince at the first possible moment? How go things in the North? Have you any news, sir?"

"The Prince crossed the Border yesterday. He marches to Lancashire."

She twined her fingers in excitement. "You dare not delay an hour. And you shall not. I have made everything ready. Sir, you will find I have made everything ready. See, you shall follow me downstairs and Giles will be waiting. The lock of your door fits badly, for the wood around is worm-eaten. To-morrow it will be lying on the floor, to show my uncle how you escaped. Giles will take you by a private way to the Yew Avenue, and there Bill from the stables will await you with Moonbeam saddled and ready—my uncle's favourite, no less. You will ride down the avenue very carefully, keeping on the grass and making no sound, till you reach the white gate which leads to Wakehurst Common. There Ben will meet you and guide you out of this county so that by the evening you may be in Cheshire."

"Ben the Gypsy?" he asked.

"The same. Do you know him? He is on our side and does many an errand for me."

"But, madam, what of yourself? What will your uncle say when he finds his horse gone?"

"Stolen by the gypsies—I have the story pat. There will be a pretty hue and cry, but Ben will know of its coming and take precautions. I am grieved to tell fibs, but needs must in the day of war."

"But I leave you alone to face the consequences."

"Oh, do not concern yourself for me. My dear uncle is indulgent and, though a Whig, is no bigot. He will not grieve for your absence at breakfast to-morrow. But I fear the loss of Moonbeam will put him terribly out, and I should be obliged if you could find some way of restoring the horse when his purpose is served. As for myself, I propose leaving this hospitable house no later than to-morrow and journeying north into Derbyshire. I will take Mr. Johnson with me as company and protector, and I have also my servants from Weston."

She spoke with the air of a commander-in-chief, an air so mature and mistressly that it betrayed her utter youth.

"I am most deeply beholden to you, my lady," said Alastair. "You know something of me, and I will beg in return some news of my benefactress. You are my lady Norreys?"

The matronly airs fled and she was a shy child again.

"I am m-my lady," she stammered, "this week back. How did you know, sir? The faithful Puffin? My dear Sir John has gone north to join his Prince, by whose side you will doubtless

meet him. Tell him I too have done my humble mite of service to the Cause, and that I am well, and happy in all things but his absence. . . . See, I have written him a little letter which will serve equally to present you to him and to assure him of my love. He is one of you—one of the trusted inner circle, I mean.” She lowered her voice. “He bears the name of *Achilles*.”

The hazel eyes had ceased to sparkle and become modest and dim.

“Tell me one thing, my lady, before I go. My mission to the South was profoundly secret, and not four men in the Prince’s army knew of it. Yet I find myself and my doings set forth in a justice’s warrant as if I had cried them in the streets. There is a traitor abroad and if he goes undetected he spells ruin to our Cause. Can you help me to unearth him ? ”

She wrinkled her brows and narrowed her startled eyes.

“I cannot guess. Save you and Sir John I have seen no professor of our faith. Stay, who was the mummer last night in the Justice Room ? ”

“Some common jackal of Hanover. No, the danger is not there. But, madam, you have a quick brain and a bold heart. If you can lay your finger on this fount of treason, you will do a noble work for our Prince. Have you the means to send a message to the North ? ”

She nodded. “Assuredly—by way of Sir John. . . . But you must start forthwith, sir. I will take your mails into Derbyshire in my charge, for you

must ride fast and light. Now, follow me, and tread softly when I lift my hand."

Down the long stone stairs the lantern fluttered, and at a corner the man who followed caught a glimpse of bare rosy ankles above the furred slippers. In the manor galleries, where oaken flooring creaked, a hand was now and then raised to advise caution. Once there came the slamming of a door, and the lantern-bearer froze into stillness behind an armoire, while Alastair, crouched beside her, felt the beating of her heart. But without mishap they reached the Great Hall, where the last red embers crackled fitfully and a cricket ticked on the hearthstone. Through a massive door they entered another corridor and the girl whistled long and soft. The answer was a crack of light from a side door, and Giles appeared, cloaked like a conspirator and carrying a pewter candlestick. Gone was the decorum of the butler who had set the stage in the Justice Room, and it was a nervous furtive old serving-man who received the girl's instructions.

"Oh, my lady, I'm doing this for your mother's sake, her as I used to make posies for when I was no more'n buttery lad. But my knees do knock together cruel, for what Squire would say if he knew makes my blood freeze to think on."

"Now, don't be a fool, Giles. I can manage your master, and you have nothing to do but lead this gentleman to the Yew Avenue, and then back to your bed with a clear conscience."

She laid a hand on the young man's arm—

the gesture with which a boy encourages a friend.

“Adieu, sir, and I pray God that He lead you swift and straight to your journey’s end. I will be in Derbyshire—at Brightwell under the Peak, waiting to bid you welcome when you come south to the liberation of England.” He took her hand, kissed it, and, with a memory of wistful eyes and little curls that strayed from her cap’s lace and satin, he followed the butler through the kitchen postern into the gloom of the night.

A short and stealthy journey among shrubberies brought them to a deeper blackness which proved to be a grove of yews. Something scraped and rustled close ahead, and the hoarse whisper of Giles received a hoarse answer. The night was not so dark as to hide objects outside the shade of the trees, and on a patch of grass Alastair made out a horse with a man beside it. Bill the stableman put the bridle into his hand, after making certain by a word with Giles that he was the person awaited. Alastair found a guinea for each, and before their muttered thanks were done was in the saddle, moving, as he had been instructed, into the blackness of the great avenue.

The light mouth, the easy paces, the smooth ripple of muscle under his knees told him that he was mounted on no common horse, but his head was still too full of his late experience to be very observant about the present. The nut-brown girl, the melodious voice with a stammer like a break in a nightingale’s song, seemed too delicious

and strange for reality. And yet she was flesh and blood; he had felt her body warm against his when they sheltered behind the armoire: it was her doing that he was now at liberty and posting northward. Now he understood Mr. Johnson's devotion. To serve such a lady he would himself scale the blue air and plough the high hills, as the bards sang.

The bemusement took him down the avenue till the trees thinned out and on the right came the ghostly glimmer of a white gate. He turned and found it open, and by it another horseman.

"The gentleman from Miss Claudy—beg y'r pardon—from m'lady?" a voice asked.

"The same," Alastair replied. The speech was that of the gypsy he had met the day before.

The man shut the gate with his whip. "Then follow me close and not a cheep o' talk. We've some cunning and fast journeying to do before the day breaks."

They swept at a canter down a long lane, deeply rutted, and patched here and there with clumps of blackberries. Then they were on a heath, where the sky was lighter and the road had to be carefully picked round sandpits and quarry-holes. Alastair had no guess at direction, for the sky showed never a star, and though the dark was not impenetrable it was hopeless to look for landmarks. A strange madcap progress they made over every kind of country, now on road, now in woodland, now breasting slopes of heath with the bracken rubbing on the stirrups. Oftenest

they were in forest land, where sometimes there was no path and Alastair found it best to give his horse its head and suffer it to do the steering. He had forgotten that England could be so wild, for these immense old boles and the miles of thicket and mere belonged surely to a primeval world. Again the course would be over fallow and new plough, and again in lanes and parish roads, and now and then on the turnpike. The pace was easy—a light canter, but there were no halts, and always ahead over hedge and through gap went the slim figure of the gypsy.

The air was chilly but not cold, and soon the grey cloth of darkness began to thin till it was a fine veil dimming but not hiding objects, and the light wind blew which even on the stillest night heralds the dawn. The earth began to awake, lights kindled in farms and cottages, lanterns flickered around steadings. Movement through this world just struggling out of sleep was a joy and an exhilaration. It reminded Alastair of a winter journey from Paris to Beauvais—part of a Prince's wager—when with relays of horses he had ridden down the night, through woods and hamlets dumb with snow, intoxicated with his youth, and seeing mystery in every light that glimmered out of the dark. Now he was in the same mood. His spirits rose at the signs of awakening humanity. That lantern by the brook was a shepherd pulling hay for the tups now huddled in the sheep-cote. The light at that window was the goodwife grilling bacon for the farmer's break-

fast, or Blowselinda of the Inn sweeping the parlour after the night's drinking. And through that homely ritual of morn he was riding north to the wars which should upturn thrones and make nobles of plain captains. Youth! Romance! And somewhere in the background of his brain a voice sounded like a trill of music. "Adieu, sir. I pray God . . . I go to B-brightwell under the P-peak . . ."

The light had grown and he had his first view of Black Ben, and Ben of him. They jostled at a gate and stared at each other.

"We meet again," he said.

"Happy meeting, my dear good gentleman. But you were on a different errand yesterday when my duty drove me the way of hot ashes. No offence took along of a poor man's honesty, kind sir?"

"None," said Alastair. He saw now the reason for the gypsy's presence with the recruits. He was in Jacobite pay, hired to scatter Oglethorpe's levies and so reduce Wade's command. But none the less he disliked the man—his soft sneering voice, and the shifty eyes which he remembered from yesterday.

It was now almost broad day, about eight in the morning, and Alastair reckoned that they must have travelled twenty miles and be close on the Cheshire border. The country was featureless—much woodland interspersed with broad pastures, and far to the east a lift of ground towards a range of hills. The weather was soft and clear,

a fine scenting morning for the hunt, and far borne on the morning air came the sound of a horn.

The gypsy seemed to be at fault. He stopped and considered for a matter of five minutes with his ear cocked. Then he plunged into a copse and emerged in a rushy bottom between high woods. Here the sound of the horn was heard again, apparently from the slopes at the end of the bottom.

"The turnpike runs yonder at the back of the oak clump," he said. "Best get to it by the brook there and the turf bridge. I must leave you, pretty gentleman. You take the left turn and hold on, and this night you will sleep in Warrington."

They were jogging towards the brook when Alastair took a fancy to look back, and saw between the two woods a tiny landscape neatly framed in the trees. There was a church tower in it, and an oddly shaped clump of ashes. Surely it was familiar.

Across the brook the hunting horn sounded again, this time from beyond a spinney at the top of the slope.

"There lies your road, pretty sir," and the gypsy pointed to the left of the spinney and wheeled his horse to depart.

But Alastair was looking back again. The higher ground of the slope gave him a wider prospect, and he saw across one of the enclosing woods the tall chimneys of a great house. That did not

detain his eye, which was caught by something beyond. There on a low ridge was sprawled a big village with square-towered church and a blur of smoke above the line of houses. England must be a monotonous land, for this village of Cheshire was the very image of Flambury, and the adjacent mansion might have been Squire Thicknesse's manor.

At the same moment the music of hounds crashed from the spinney ahead, and a horn was violently blown. Round the edge of the spinney came the hunt, and the pack was spilled out of its shade like curds from a broken dish. The sight, novel in his experience, held him motionless. He saw the huntsman struggling with outrunners, and the field, urged on by the slope, crowding on the line. In the rear he saw a figure which was uncommonly like the magistrate who had presided last night in the Justice Room. As he observed these things he realized that his twenty miles of the morning had been a circuit, and that he was back now at the starting-point, mounted on a stolen horse, and within a hundred yards of the horse's owner. The gypsy had set spurs to his beast and was disappearing round the other end of the spinney, and even in the hubbub of the hunt he thought he detected the man's mocking laugh.

To hesitate was to be lost, and there was but the one course open. A tawny streak had slid before the hounds towards the brook. That must be the fox, and if he were not to become the

quarry in its stead he must join in the chase. The huntsman was some twenty yards from him, immediately behind the hounds, and fifty yards at his back came the van of the field. In that van he could see Squire Thicknesse mounted on a powerful grey, and he seemed to have eyes only for the hounds. Alastair cut in well behind him, in the hope that he would be taken for a straggler at covert-side, and in three seconds was sweeping forward in the second flight.

The morning's ride had been for Moonbeam no more than a journey to the meet, and the beautiful animal now laid back his ears and settled down to his share in that game which he understood as well as any two-legged mortal. But in the very perfection of the horse lay the rider's peril. Moonbeam was accustomed to top the hunt, for Squire Thicknesse was famed over three shires as a good goer. He would not be content to travel a field or two behind hounds; he must keep them company. Alastair found that no checking could restrain his mount. The animal was lightly bitted and he had not the skill or the strength to hold him back. True, he could have swerved and fetched a wide circuit, but in that first rush these tactics did not suggest themselves, and he set himself to a frantic effort at reining in, in which he was worsted. Moonbeam crossed the brook like a swallow; in a boggy place he took off badly, topped an ox-bar in the hedge, and all but fell on his nose in the next meadow. But after that he made no mistake, and in five minutes

Alastair found himself looking from ten yards' distance at the broad back of the huntsman, with no rider near him except Squire Thicknesse on the grey.

The going was good over old pasture, and the young man had leisure to recover his breath and consider his position. He had hunted buck in France—stately promenades in the forests of Fontainebleau and Chantilly, varied by mad gallops along grassy rides where the only risk was the cannoning into other cavaliers. But this chase of the fox was a very different matter, the glory of it went to his head like strong wine, and he would not have cried off if he could. So far he was undiscovered. Were the fumes of last night's revel still in the Squire's head, or had he never meant to ride Moonbeam that day and his groom kept the loss from him? Crossing a thickset hedge neck by neck, Alastair stole a glance at him, and decided that the former explanation was the true one. His late host was still in the process of growing sober. . . . It could not last for ever. Sooner or later must come a check or a kill, when he would have a chance to look at his neighbour and his neighbour's horse. . . . Then he must ride for it, become himself the fox, and trust to Moonbeam. Pray God that the run took them to the north and ended many miles from Flambury.

For the better part of an hour hounds ran without a check—away from the enclosed fields and the woodlands to a country of furzy downs and

bracken-filled hollows, and then once more into a land of tangled thickets. It took about twenty minutes to clear Squire Thicknesse's brain. Alastair heard a sudden roar behind him and looked over his shoulder to see a furious blue eye fixed on him, and to hear a bellow of—"Damme, it's my horse. It's my little Moonbeam!" He saw a whip raised, and felt it swish a foot from his leg. There was nothing for it but to keep his distance from the wrathful gentleman, and so gallantly did Moonbeam respond that he was presently at the huntsman's elbow.

Had he known it, the grey was the faster of the two, though lacking Moonbeam's sweet paces and lionlike heart. His enemy was up on him at once, and it looked as if there was nothing before him but to override hounds. But the discipline of the sport was stronger than a just wrath. The Squire took a pull on the grey and drew back. He was biding his time.

Alastair seized the first chance, which came when hounds were engulfed in a wide wood of oaks on the edge of a heath. Taking advantage of a piece of thick cover, he caught Moonbeam by the head and swung him down a side glade. Unfortunately he was observed. An oath from Squire Thicknesse warned him that that sportsman had forgone the pleasure of being in at the death for the satisfaction of doing justice on a horse-thief.

Now there was no hunt etiquette to be respected. The grey's hooves spurned the rotten

woodland turf, and pursuer and pursued crashed into a jungle of dry bulrushes and salallows. Alastair was saved by the superior agility of his horse, which could swerve and pivot where the heavier grey stumbled. He gained a yard or two, then a little more by a scramble through a gap, and a crazy scurry down a rabbit track. . . . He saw that his only chance was to slip off, for Moonbeam had the madness of the chase on him, and if left riderless would rejoin the hounds. So when he had gained some forty yards and was for the moment out of the Squire's sight, he took his toes from the stirrups and flung himself into a bed of bracken. He rolled over and over into a dell, and when he came to a halt and could look up he saw the grey's stern disappearing round the corner, and heard far off the swish and crash of Moonbeam's flight.

Not a second was to be lost, for the Squire would soon see that the rider had gone and turn back in the search for him. Alastair forced his stiff legs to a run, and turned in the direction which he thought the opposite of that taken by hounds. Up a small path he ran, among a scrub of hazels and down into a desert of red bracken and sparse oak trees. The noises in the wood grew fainter, and soon his steps were the loudest sound—his steps and the heavy flight of an occasional scared pigeon. He ran till he had put at least a mile of rough land behind him, and had crossed several tracks, which would serve to mislead the pursuit. Lacking a bloodhound, it would not be easy to

follow his trail. Then in a broader glade he came upon a thatched hovel, such as foresters and charcoal-burners use when they have business abroad in the night hours.

Alastair crept up to it cautiously, and through a crack surveyed the interior. His face hardened and an odd light came into his eye. He strode to the door and pushed the crazy thing open.

Within, breakfasting on a hunch of bread and cheese, sat the man Edom, Mr. Kyd's servant.

CHAPTER VIII

BROOM AT THE CROSS-ROADS

THE face before him had the tightened look of a sudden surprise: then it relaxed into recognition; but it showed no fear, though the young man's visage was grim enough.

"You are Mr. Kyd's servant?"

"Your honour has it. I'm Edom Lowrie at your honour's service."

"Your master started yesterday for Wiltshire. Why are you not with him?"

The man looked puzzled.

"Ye're mista'en, sir. My maister came here yestereen. I left him at skreigh o' day this morning."

It was Alastair's turn to stare. Kyd had lied to him, thinking it necessary to deceive him about his road—scurvy conduct, surely, between servants of the same cause. Or perhaps this fellow Edom was lying. He looked at him and saw no hint of double-dealing in the plain ugly face. His sandy eyebrows were indistinguishable from his freckled forehead and gave him an air of bald innocence, his pale eyes were candid and good-humoured, the eaves of his great teeth were comedy

itself. The more Alastair gazed the harder he found it to believe that this rustic zany had betrayed him. But what on earth was Kyd about ?

“ Where is your master now ? ” he asked.

The other took off his hat and scratched his head. “ I wadna like to say, sir. You see he telled me little, forbye sayin’ that he wadna see me again for the best pairt o’ a month. I jalouse mysel’ that he’s gone south, but he micht be for Wales.”

“ Were you in Flambury last night ? ”

The man looked puzzled till Alastair explained. “ Na, na, I was in nae village. I had a cauld damp bed in a bit public. My maister wasna there, but he appeared afore I was out o’ the blankets, a’ ticht and trim for the road, and gied me my marching-orders. I was to traivel the woods on foot, and no get mysel’ a horse till I won to a place they ca’ Camley.”

“ Are you for Scotland ? ”

“ Nae sic fortune. I’m for the Derbyshire muirs wi’ letters.” He hesitated. “ Your honour’s no gaun that road yoursel’ ? I wad be blithe o’ company.”

The light in the hut was too dim to see clearly, for there was no window, the door was narrow and the day was sullen.

“ Step outside, Mr. Lowrie, till I cast an eye over you,” said Alastair.

The man pocketed the remains of his bread and cheese and shambled into the open. He wore a long horseman’s coat and boots, a plain hat with-

out cocks, and carried a stout hazel riding-switch. He looked less like a lackey than some small yeoman of the Borders, habited for a journey to Carlisle or St. Boswell's Fair.

"You know who I am," said Alastair. "You are aware that like your master I am in a certain service, and that between him and me there are no secrets."

"Aye, sir. I ken that ye're Captain Maclean, and a gude Scot, though ower far north o' Forth for my ain taste, if your honour will forgie me."

"You carry papers? I must know more of your journey. What is your goal?"

"A bit the name o' Brightwell near a hill they ca' the Peak."

Alastair had not been prepared for this, had had no glimmering of a suspicion of it, and the news decided him.

"It is of the utmost importance that I see your papers. Your master, if he were here now, would consent."

The man's face flushed. "I kenna how that can be. Your honour wadna have me false to my trust."

"You will not be false. You travel on a matter of the Prince's interest, as I do, and I must know your errand fully in order to shape my own course. Your master and I have equal rank in His Highness's councils."

The other shook his head, as if perplexed. "Nae doot—nae doot. But, ye see, sir, I've my orders, and I maun abide by them. 'Pit thae letters,'

my maister says, 'intil the hand of him ye ken o' and let naebody else get a glisk o' them.' "

"Then it is my duty to take them by force," said Alastair, showing the hilt of his sword and the butt of a pistol under his coat.

Edom's face cleared.

"That is a wiser-like way o' speakin'. If ye compel me I maun e'en submit, for ye're a gentleman wi' a sword and I'm a landward body wi' nocht but a hazel wand. It's no that I mistrust your honour, but we maun a' preserve the decencies."

He unbuttoned his coat, foraged in the recesses of his person, and from some innermost receptacle extracted a packet tied with a dozen folds of cobbler's twine. There was no seal to break, and Alastair slit the knots with his sword. Within was a bunch of papers of the same type as those he had received from Brother Gilly, and burned in the fire of the Dog and Gun. These he put in his pocket for further study. "I must read them carefully, for they contain that which must go straight to the Prince's ear," he told the perplexed messenger.

But there was a further missive, which seemed to be a short personal note from Mr. Kyd to the recipient of the papers.

"*Dear Achilles,*" it ran. "*Affairs march smoothly and the tide sets well to bring you to Troy town, where presently I design to crack a bottle and exchange tales. The Lady Briseis purposes to join you and will not be dissuaded by her kinsman. A*

friendly word : mix caution with your ardour herward, for she has got a political enthusiasm and is devilish strong-headed. The news of the Marches and the West will travel to you with all expedition, but I must linger behind to encourage my correspondents. Menelaus greets you—a Menelaus that never owned a Helen."

The full sense of the document did not at first reach Alastair's brain. But he caught the word "*Achilles*," and remembered a girl's whispered confidence the night before. A second phrase arrested him—"Briseis"—he remembered enough of Father Dominic's teaching to identify the reference. This Norreys, this husband of the russet lady, was far deeper in the secrets of the Cause than he had dreamed, if he were thus made the channel of vital intelligence. He was bidden act cautiously towards his new wife, and Mr. Kyd, who had heard Johnson's accusations at Cornbury and said nothing, had all the time been in league with him. A sudden sense of a vast insecurity overcame the young man. The ground he trod on seemed shifting sand, and nowhere was there a firm and abiding landmark. And the girl too was walking in dark ways, and when she thought that she tripped over marble and cedar was in truth skimming the crust of quicksands. He grew hot with anger.

"Do you know the man to whom these are addressed ?" he asked with stern brows.

Edom grinned.

"I ken how to find him. I'm to speir in certain

quarters for ane Achilles, and I mind eneuch o' what the Lauder dominie lickit intil me to ken that Achilles was a braw sodger."

"You do not know his name? You never saw him?"

The man shook his head. "I wad like the letters back, sir," he volunteered warily, for he was intimidated by Alastair's dark forehead.

The latter handed back the *Achilles* letter, and began to read more carefully the other papers. Suddenly he raised his head and listened. The forest hitherto had been still with the strange dead quiet of a November noon. But now the noise of hounds was heard again, not half a mile off, as if they were hunting a line in the brushwood. He awoke with a start to the fact of his danger. What better sport for the patrons of the Flambury Hunt than to ride down a Jacobite horse-thief? A vague fury possessed him against that foolish squire with the cherubic face and the vacant blue eye.

"The hunt is cried after me," he told Edom, "and I take it you too have no desire to advertise your whereabouts. For God's sake let's get out of this place. Where does this road lead?"

Edom's answer was drowned in a hubbub of hounds which seemed to be approaching down the ride from the east. Alastair led the way from the hut up a steepish hill, sparsely wooded with scrub oak, in the hope of finding a view-point. Unfortunately at the top the thicket was densest, so the young man swung himself into a tree and

as quickly as riding-boots would permit sought a coign of vantage in its upper branches. There he had the prospect he wanted—a great circle of rolling country, most of it woodland, but patched with large heaths where gorse-fires were smouldering. The piece of forest in which he sat stretched far to east and west, but to the north was replaced in less than a mile by pasture and small enclosures. As he looked he saw various things to disquiet him. The grassy road they had left was visible for half a mile, and down it came horsemen, while at the other end there seemed to be a picket placed. Worse still, to the north, which was the way of escape he had thought of, there were mounted men at intervals along the fringe of the trees. The hounds could be heard drawing near in the scrub east of the hut, and men's voices accompanied them. He remembered that they would find the hut door open, see the crumbs of Edom's bread and cheese, and no doubt discover the track which led up the hill.

He scrambled to the ground, his heart filled with forebodings and a deep disgust. He, who should long ago have been in the battle-field among the leaders, was befogged in this remote country-side, pursued by yokels, clogged and hampered at every step, and yet with the most desperate urgency of haste to goad him forward. His pride was outraged by such squalid ill-fortune. He must get his head from the net which was entangling and choking him. But for the moment there was nothing for it but to cower like a hare,

and somewhere in the deep scrub find a hiding-place. Happily a foxhound was not a bloodhound.

Down the other side of the hill they went, Edom panting heavily and slipping every second yard. At the bottom they came on another road running parallel with the first, and were about to cross it when a sound from in front gave them pause. There were men there, keepers perhaps, beating the undergrowth and whistling. The two turned to the west and ran down the track, keeping as far as possible in the shadow of the adjacent coppice. A fine rain was beginning, which brought with it a mist that lowered the range of vision to a few hundred yards. In that lay Alastair's one hope. Let the weather thicken and he would undertake to elude all the foresters and fox-hunters in England. He cursed the unfamiliar land, which had no hills where fleetness of foot availed or crags where a bold man could laugh at pursuit.

The place seemed terribly full of folk, as if whole parishes had emptied their population to beat the covers. Now he realized that the mist had its drawbacks as well as its merits, for he might stumble suddenly into a posse of searchers, and, though he himself might escape, the clumsier Edom would be taken. He bade the latter choose a line of his own and save himself, as he was not the object of the hunt, and owed his chief danger to his company, but this the man steadfastly refused to do. He ploughed stubbornly along in Alastair's wake, wheezing like a bellows.

Then the noises seemed to die down, and the two continued in a dripping quiet. It was idle to think of leaving the forest, and the best that could be done was to find a hiding-place when they were certain that the pursuit was outdistanced. But this meant delay, and these slow rustics might keep up their watch for a week. . . .

Presently they came to a cross-roads, where a broader path cut their ride, and in the centre stood an old rotting stake, where long ago some outlaw may have swung. They halted, for Edom had his breath to get. He flung himself on the ground, and at that moment Alastair caught sight of something tied to the post. Going nearer, he saw that it was a bunch of broom.

Had his wits not been sharpened by danger and disgust it might have had no meaning for him. But, as it was, Midwinter's parting words on Ot-moor came back to him, and with it the catch which he had almost forgotten. As Edom lay panting, he shaped his lips to whistle the air. In the quiet the tune rang clear and shrill, and as he finished there was silence again. Then the bushes parted, and a man came out.

He was a charcoal-burner, with a face like an Ethiopian, and red sore eyes curiously ringed about with clean white skin.

"Ye have the tune, master," he said. "What be your commands for the Spoonbills? Folks be huntin' these woods, and maybe it's you as they're seekin'."

"The place is surrounded," said Alastair, "and

they are beating the covers between the rides. Get us out, or show us how we can be hid."

The man did not hesitate. "Escape's better'n hidin'," he said. "Follow me, sirs, and I'll do my best for ye."

He led them at a great pace some two hundred yards into a tiny dell. There a glaze hung in the dull air from a charcoal-oven, which glowed under a mound of sods. Neat piles of oak and birch billets stood around, and the shafts of a cart stuck up out of the long bracken. On one side an outcrop of rock made a fine wind-shelter, and, pushing aside the creepers which veiled it, the charcoal-burner revealed a small cave.

"Off with your clothes, sirs," he said. "They'll be safe enough in that hidy-hole till I gets a chance to return 'em. Them rags is my mates', and in this pickle are better'n fine silks."

Two filthy old smocks were unearthed, and two pairs of wooden-soled clogs which replaced their boots. The change was effected swiftly under the constant urging of the charcoal-burner, who kept his ears cocked and his head extended like a dog. In five minutes Alastair was outwardly a figure differing only in complexion from the master of the dingle. Then the latter set to work, and with a handful of hot charcoal smeared hands and faces, rubbing the dirt into the eye-sockets so that the eyes smarted and watered. Hats and cravats were left in the cave, and Alastair's trim hair was roughly dusted with soot for powder. There was no looking-glass to

show him the result, but the charcoal-burner seemed satisfied. The transformation was simpler for Edom, who soon to Alastair's eyes looked as if he had done nothing all his days but tend a smoky furnace.

"I'll do the talking if we happen to meet inquiring folk," the charcoal-burner admonished them. "Look sullen and keep your eyes on the ground, and spit—above all, spit. Ours is a dry trade."

He led them back to the main ride, and then boldly along the road which pointed north. The forest had woke up, and there were sounds of life on every side. The hounds had come out of covert and were being coaxed in again by a vociferous huntsman. Echoes of "Sweetlip," "Rover," "Trueman," mingled with sundry oaths, came gustily down the wind. Some one far off blew a horn incessantly, and in a near thicket there was a clamour of voices like those of beaters after roebuck. The three men tramped stolidly along, the two novices imitating as best they could the angular gait, as of one who rarely stretched his legs, and the blindish carriage of the charcoal-burner.

A knot of riders swept down on them. Alastair ventured to lift his eyes for one second, and saw the scarlet and plum colour of Squire Thicknesse and noted the grey's hocks. The legs finicking and waltzing near them he thought belonged to Moonbeam, and was glad that the horse had been duly caught and restored. The Squire asked

a question of the charcoal-burner and was answered in a dialect of gutturals. Off surged the riders, and presently the three were at the edge of the trees where a forester's cottage smoked in the rain. Beyond, wrapped in a white mist, stretched ploughland and pasture.

Alastair saw that his tree-top survey had been right. This edge of the wood was all picketed, and as the three emerged a keeper in buckskin breeches came towards them, and a man on horseback turned at his cry and cantered back.

The keeper did not waste time on them, once he had a near view.

"Yah!" he said, "it's them salvages o' coalies. They ain't got eyes to obsarve nothin', pore souls! 'Ere, Billy," he cried, "seen any strange gen'elmen a-wanderin' the woods this morning?"

The charcoal-burner stopped, and the two others formed up sullenly behind him.

"There wor a fallow-buck a routin' round my foorness," he grumbled in a voice as thick as clay. "Happen it come to some 'urt, don't blame me, gossip. Likewise there's a badger as is makin' an earth where my birch-faggots should lie. That's all the strange gen'elmen I seen this marnin', barrin' a pack o' red-coats a-gallopin' 'orses and blowin' 'orns."

The rider had now arrived and was looking curiously at the three. The keeper in corduroy breeches turned laughing to him. "Them coalies is pure salvages, Mr. Gervase, sir. Brocks and bucks, indeed, when I'm inquiren' for gen'elmen.

Gawd A'mighty made their 'eads as weak as their eyes."

What answer the rider gave is not known, for the charcoal-burners had already moved forward. They crossed a piece of plough and reached a shallow vale seamed by a narrow stagnant brook. Here they were in shelter, and to Alastair's surprise their leader began to run. He took them at a good pace up the water till it was crossed by a high-road, then along a by-path, past a farm-steading, to a strip of woodland, which presently opened out into a wide heath. Here in deference to Edom's heaving chest he slackened pace. The rain was changing from a drizzle to a heavy down-pour and the faces of the two amateurs were becoming a ghastly piebald with the lashing of the weather.

The charcoal-burner turned suddenly to Alastair and spoke in a voice which had no trace of dialect.

"You have escaped one danger, sir. I do not know who you may be or what your desires are, but I am bound to serve you as far as it may lie in my power. Do you wish me to take you to my master?"

"I could answer that better, if I knew who he was."

"We do not speak his name at large, but in a month's time the festival of his name-day will return."

Alastair nodded. The thought of Midwinter came suddenly to him with an immense comfort. He, if any one could, would help him out of this

miasmatic jungle in which his feet were entangled and set him again upon the highway. His head was still confused with the puzzle of Kyd's behaviour, Edom's errand, the exact part played by Sir John Norreys—above all, the presence of a subtle treason. He remembered the deep eyes and the wise brow of the fiddler of Otmoor, and had he not that very day seen a proof of his power?

The heath billowed and sank into ridges and troughs, waterless and furze-clad, and in one of the latter they came suddenly upon a house. It was a small place, built with its back to a steep ridge all overgrown with blackberries and heather—two stories high, and flanked by low thatched outbuildings, and a pretence at a walled garden. On the turf before the door, beside an ancient well, a sign on a pole proclaimed it the inn of The Merry Woman, but suns and frosts had long since obliterated all trace of the rejoicing lady, though below it and more freshly painted was something which might have resembled a human eye.

The three men lounged into the kitchen, which was an appanage to the main building, and called for ale. It was brought by a little old woman in a mutch, who to Alastair's surprise curtsied to the grimy figure of the charcoal-burner.

"He's alone, sir," she said, "and your own room's waiting if you're ready for it."

"Will you go up to him?" the charcoal-burner asked, and Alastair followed the old woman. She led the way up a narrow staircase with a neat sheepskin rug on each tread, to a tiny corridor

from which two rooms opened. The one on the left they entered and found an empty bedroom, cleanly and plainly furnished. A door in the wall at the other end, concealed by a hanging cupboard, gave access to a pitch-dark passage. The woman took Alastair's hand and led him a yard or two till she found a door-handle. It opened and showed a large chamber with daylight coming through windows apparently half cloaked with creepers. Alastair realized that the room had been hollowed out of the steep behind the house, and that the windows opened in the briars and heath of the face.

A fire was burning and a man sat beside it reading in a book. He was the fiddler of Otmoor, and in the same garb, save that he had discarded his coat and wore instead a long *robe de chambre*. A keen eye scanned the visitor, and then followed a smile and an outstretched hand.

"Welcome, Alastair Maclean," he said. "I heard of you in these parts and hoped for a meeting."

"From whom?"

"One whom you call the Spainneach. He left me this morning to go into Derbyshire."

The name stirred a question.

"Had he news?" Alastair asked. "When I last saw you you prophesied failure. Are you still of that mind?"

"I do not prophesy, but this I say—that since I saw you your chances and your perils have grown alike. Your Cause is on the razor-edge and you yourself may have the deciding."

CHAPTER IX

OLD ENGLAND

“YESTERDAY morning your Prince was encamped outside Carlisle. By now the place may have fallen.”

“Who told you ? ” Alastair asked.

“I have my own messengers who journey in Old England,” said Midwinter. “Consider, Captain Maclean. As a bird flies, the place is not a hundred and fifty miles distant, and no mile is without its people. A word cried to a traveller is taken up by another and another till the man who rubs down a horse at night in a Chester inn-yard will have news of what befell at dawn on the Scotch Border. My way is quicker than post-horses. . . . But the name of inn reminds me. You have the look of a fasting man.”

Food was brought, and the November brume having fallen thick in the hollow, the windows were curtained, a lamp lit, and fresh fuel laid on the fire. Alastair kicked the boots from his weary legs, and as soon as his hunger was stayed fell to questioning his host ; for he felt that till he could point a finger to the spy who had dogged him he

had failed in his duty to the Cause. He poured out his tale without reserve.

Midwinter bent his brows and stared into the fire.

"You are satisfied that this servant Edom is honest?" he asked.

"I have observed him for half a day and the man is as much in the dark as myself. If he is a rogue he is a master in dissimulation. But I do not think so."

"*Imprimis*, you are insulted in the Flambury inn by those who would fasten a quarrel on you. *Item*, you are arrested and carried before this man Thicknesse, and one dressed like a mummer presses the accusation. *Item*, in a warrant you and your purposes are described with ominous accuracy. You are likewise this very day tricked by your gypsy guide, but that concerns rather my lady Norreys. These misfortunes came upon you after you had supped with Kyd, and therefore you suspected his servant, for these two alone in this country-side knew who you were. A fairly argued case, I concede, and to buttress it Kyd appears to have been near Flambury last night, when he professed to be on the road for Wiltshire. But you have ceased to suspect the servant. What of the master?"

Alastair started. "No, no. That is madness. The man is in the very heart of the Prince's counsels. He is honest, I swear—he is too deep committed."

Midwinter nodded. "If he were false, it would

indeed go ill with you ; for on him, I take it, depends the rising of Wales and the Marches. He holds your Prince in the hollow of his hand. And if all tales be true the omens there are happy."

Alastair told of the message from Brother Gilly, and, suddenly remembering Edom's papers, drew them from his pocket, and read them again by the firelight. Here at last was news from Badminton and from Monmouth and Hereford : and at the foot, in the cypher which was that most commonly used among the Jacobites, was a further note dealing with Sir Watkin Wynn. The writer had concerted with him a plan, by which the Welsh levies should march straight through Gloucester and Oxfordshire to cut in between Cumberland and the capital. To Alastair, the thing was proved authentic beyond doubt, for it bore the pass-word which had been agreed between himself and Sir Watkin a week before at Wynnstay.

He fell into a muse from which he was roused by Midwinter's voice.

"Kyd receives messages and forwards them northward, while he himself remains in the south. By what channel ? "

"It would appear by Sir John Norreys, who is now, or soon will be, at Brightwell under the Peak."

As he spoke the words his suspicions took a new course. Johnson had thought the man a time-server, though he had yesterday recanted that view. Sir Christopher Lacy at Cornbury had been positive that he was a rogue. The only evidence

to the contrary was that his wife believed in him, and that he had declared his colours by forsaking his bride for the Prince's camp. But he had not gone to the army, and it would seem that he had no immediate intention of going there, for according to Edom he would be at Brightwell during the month; and as for his wife's testimony, she was only a romantic child. Yet this man was the repository of Kyd's secret information, the use of which meant for the Prince a kingdom or a beggar's exile. If Kyd were mistaken in him, then the Cause was sold in very truth. But how came Kyd to be linked with him? How came a young Oxfordshire baronet, of no great family, and no record of service, to be *Achilles* of the innermost circle?

He told his companion of his doubts, unravelling each coil carefully, while the other marked his points with jerks of his pipe-bowl. When he had finished Midwinter kept silent for a little. Then "You swear by Kyd's fidelity?" he asked.

"God in Heaven, but I must," cried Alastair. "If he is false, I may return overseas to-morrow."

"It is well to test all links in a chain," was the dry answer. "But for the sake of argument we will assume him honest. Sir John Norreys is the next link to be tried. If he is rotten, then the Prince had better bide north of Ribble, for the Western auxiliaries will never move. But even if the whole hive be false, there is still hope if you act at once. This is my counsel to you, Captain Maclean. Write straightway to the Army—choose

the man about the Prince who loves you most—and tell him of the great things to be hoped for from the West. Name no names, but promise before a certain date to arrive with full proof, and bid them hasten south without delay. An invasion needs heartening, and if the worst should be true no word from Kyd is likely to reach the Prince. Hearten him, therefore, so that he marches to meet you. That is the first thing. The second is that you go yourself into Derbyshire to see this Sir John Norreys. If he be true man you will find a friend; if not you may be in time to undo his treason.”

The advice was what had dimly been shaping itself in Alastair's own mind. His ardour to be back with the Army, which for days had been a fever in his bones, had now changed to an equal ardour to solve the riddle which oppressed him. Midwinter was right; the Cause was on a razor edge and with him might lie the deciding. . . . There was black treachery somewhere, and far more vital for the Prince than any victory in Scotland was the keeping the road open for West England to join him. Shadows of many reasons flitted across his mind and gave strength to his resolve. He would see this man Norreys who had won so adorable a lady. He would see the lady again, and at the thought something rose in his heart which surprised him, for it was almost joy.

“Have you paper and ink?” he asked, and from a cupboard Midwinter produced them and set them before him.

He wrote to Lochiel, who was his kinsman, for though he knew Lord George Murray there was a certain jealousy between them. Very roughly he gave the figures which he had gleaned from Brother Gilly's letter and that taken from Edom. He begged him to move the Prince to march without hesitation on the capital, and promised to reach his camp with full information before the month ended. "And the camp will, I trust, be by that time no farther from St. James's than—" He asked Midwinter for a suitable place, and was told "Derby." He subscribed himself with the affection of a kinsman and old playmate of Morvern and Lochaber.

"I will see that it reaches its destination," said Midwinter. "And now for the second task. The man Edom is not suspect and can travel by the high-road. I will send him with one who will direct him to my lady Norreys' party, which this day, as you tell me, sets out for Derbyshire. For yourself I counsel a discreeter part. Mark you, sir, you are sought by sundry gentlemen in Flambury as a Jacobite, and by Squire Thicknesse and his Hunt as a horse-thief. In this land suspicion is slow to waken, but in the end it runs fast and dies hard. Rumour of your figure, face, clothes, manner, and bloodthirsty spirit will have already flown fifty miles. If you would be safe you must sink into Old England."

"I will sink into Acheron if it will better my purpose."

Midwinter regarded him critically. "Your

modish clothes are in Kit's locker, and will duly be sent after you. Now you are the born charcoal-burner, save that your eyes are too clear and your finger nails unscorched. The disguise has served your purpose to-day, but it is too kenspeckle except in great woodlands. Mother Jonnet will find you a better. For the rest I will guide you, for I have the key."

"Where is this magic country?"

"All around you—behind the brake, across the hedgerow, under the branches. Some can stretch a hand and touch it—to others it is a million miles away."

"As a child I knew it," said Alastair, laughing. "I called it Fairyland."

Midwinter nodded. "Children are free of it, but their elders must earn admission. It is a safe land—at any rate it is secure from common perils."

"But it has its own dangers?"

"It makes a man look into his heart, and he may find that in it which destroys him. Also it is ambition's mortal foe. But if you walk in it you will come to Brightwell without obstruction, for the King's writ does not run in the greenwood."

"Whose is the law, then?" Alastair asked.

For answer Midwinter went to the window and flung it open. "My fiddle cannot speak except with free air about it," he said. "If any drunken rustic is on the heath he will think the pixies are abroad."

He picked up the violin which had been lying on the table behind him, and drew forth a slow

broken music, which presently changed into a rhythmical air. At first it was like the twanging of fine wires in a wind, mingled with an echo of organ music heard over a valley full of tree-tops. It was tame and homely, yet with a childish inconsequence in it. Then it grew wilder, and though the organ notes remained it was an organ that had never sounded within church walls. The tune went with a steady rhythm, the rhythm of growing things in spring, of seasonal changes ; but always ran the undercurrent of a leaping bacchanal madness, of long wild dances in bare places. The fiddle ceased on a soft note, and the fiddler fell to singing in a voice so low that the words and air only just rose above the pitch of silence. "Diana and her darling crew," he sang.

"Diana and her darling crew
Will pluck your fingers fine,
And lead you forth right pleasantly
To drink the honey wine,—
To drink the honey wine, my dear,
And sup celestial air,
And dance as the young angels dance,
Ah, God, that I were there !"

"Hers is the law," he said. "Diana, or, as some say, Proserpina. Old folk call her the Queen of Elfhome. But over you and me, as baptized souls, she has no spell but persuasion. You can hear her weeping at midnight because her power is gone."

Then his mood changed. He laid down the

fiddle and shouted on Mother Jonnet to bring supper. Edom, too, was sent for, and during the meal was closely catechized. He bore it well, professing no undue honesty beyond a good servant's, but stiff on his few modest scruples. When he heard Midwinter's plans for him, he welcomed them, and begged that in the choice of a horse his precarious balance and round thighs might be charitably considered. Alastair returned him the letter and watched him fold it up with the others and shove it inside his waistcoat. A prolonged study of that mild, concerned, faintly humorous face convinced him that Edom Lowrie was neither fox nor goose. He retired to bed to dream of Mr. Kyd's jolly countenance, which had mysteriously acquired a very sharp nose.

Edom went off in the early morning in company with the man called Kit and mounted on an ambling forest cob whose paces he whole-heartedly approved. Alastair washed himself like a Brahmin in a tub of hot water in the back-kitchen, and dressed himself in the garments provided by Mother Jonnet—frieze and leather and coarse woollen stockings and square-toed country shoes. The haze of yesterday had gone, and the sky was a frosty blue, with a sharp wind out of the north-east. He breakfasted with Midwinter off cold beef and beer and a dish of grilled ham, and then stood before the door breathing deep of the fresh chilly morning. The change of garb or the prospect before him had rid him of all the languor of

the past week. He felt extraordinarily lithe and supple of limb, as in the old days when he had driven deer on the hills before the autumn dawn. Had he but had the free swing of a kilt at his thighs and the screes of Ben Aripol before him he would have recaptured his boyhood.

Midwinter looked at him with approval.

"You are clad as a man should be for Old England, and you have the legs for the road we travel. We do not ride, for we go where no horse can go. Put not your trust in horses, saith the Scriptures, which I take to mean that a man in the last resort should depend on his own shanks. Boot and spur must stick to the paths, and the paths are but a tiny bit of England. How sits the wind? North by east? There is snow coming, but not in the next thirty hours, and if it comes, it will not stay us. *En avant, mon capitaine.*"

At a pace which was marvellous for one of his figure, Midwinter led the way over the heath, and then plunged into a tangled wood of oaks. He walked like a mountaineer, swinging from the hips, the body a little bent forward, and his long even strides devoured the ground. Even so, Alastair reminded himself, had the hunters at Glentarnit breasted the hill, while his boyish steps had toiled in their rear. Sometimes on level ground he would break into a run, as if his body's vigour needed an occasional burst of speed to chasten it. The young man exulted in the crisp air and the swift motion. The stiffness of

body and mind which had beset him ever since he left Scotland vanished under this cordial, he lost his doubts and misgivings, and felt again that lifting ardour of the heart which is the glory of youth. His feet were tireless, his limbs were as elastic as a sword-blade, his breath as deep as a greyhound's. Two days before, jogging in miry lanes, he had seemed caught and stifled in a net ; now he was on a hill-top, and free as the wind that plucked at his hair.

It is probable that Midwinter had for one of his purposes the creation of this happy mood, for he kept up the pace till after midday, when they came to a high deer-fence, beyond which stretched a ferny park. Here they slackened speed, their faces glowing like coals, and, skirting the park, reached a thatched hut which smoked in a dell. A woman stood at the door, who at the sight of the two would have retired inside, had not Midwinter whistled sharply on his fingers. She blinked and shaded her eyes with her hand against the frosty sunshine ; then to Alastair's amazement she curtseyed deep.

Midwinter did not halt, but asked if Jeremy were at the stone pit.

"He be, Master," was her answer. "Will ye stop to break bread ?"

"Nay, Jeremy shall feed us," he cried, and led the way up the dingle where a brook flowed in reedy pools. Presently there was a sound of axe-blows, and, rounding a corner, they came on a man cutting poles from a thicket of saplings.

Again Midwinter whistled, and the woodcutter dropped his tool and turned with a grinning face, pulling at his forelock.

Midwinter sat down on a tree-trunk.

"Jeremy, lad, you behold two hungry men waiting to sample the art of the best cook in the Borton Hundreds. Have you the wherewithal, or must we go back to your wife?"

"I has, I surely has," was the answer. "Be pleased to be seated, kind sirs, and Jerry Tusser will have your meat ready before ye have rightly eased your legs. This way, Master, this way."

He led them to a pit where a fire burned between three stones and a kettle bubbled. Plates of coarse earthenware were brought from some hiding-place, and in five minutes Alastair was supping with an iron spoon as savoury a stew as he had ever eaten. The fruits of Jeremy's snares were in it, and the fruits of Jeremy's old fowling-piece, and it was flavoured with herbs whose merits the world has forgotten. The hot meal quickened his vigour, and he was on his feet before Midwinter had done, like a dog eager to be on the road again.

He heard the man speak low to Midwinter. "Dook o' Kingston's horse," he heard and a hand was jerked northward.

In the afternoon the way lay across more open country, which Midwinter seemed to know like the palm of his hand, for he made points for some ridge or tree-top, and yet was never held up by brook or fence or dwelling. The air had grown